

Exit the Matrix, Enter the System: Capitalizing on Black Culture to Create and Sustain
Community Institutions in Post-Katrina New Orleans.

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy, in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

After the devastation wrought by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the Fall of 2005, millions of dollars of Northern philanthropic aid have poured into the Gulf Coast, as have volunteers, rebuilding professionals, and NGO workers. Subsequently, New Orleans has witnessed an explosion of NGOs and Social Enterprises, all intent on rebuilding the city and “doing good” for its residents. However, it was not simply the opening of the economic floodgates that has drawn so many outsiders to the city, it was also the threat to New Orleans’ mythic exceptionalism as the so-called “Creole Capital,” which has spurred so many willing foot soldiers to action. Drawing on ethnographic material gleaned from participant observation, interviews, and some archival research, this dissertation attempts to demystify the social and cultural forces shaping New Orleans’ ongoing process of rebuilding and recovery. Special attention is paid to the role of the arts and of aesthetics as political tools, and forms of capital available to Black actors. Illuminating the political and economic contexts within which the work of community building takes place reveals both the possibilities and the limitations which face Black New Orleanians, embedded in this dynamic landscape. Attending to external forces as well as internal relationships, it becomes clear that Black artist-activists see institution-building as a way to 1) build upon some of the only forms of capital available to Black New Orleanians – that is, social and cultural capital; 2) organize Black communities and begin to exercise some forms of Black Power; and 3) to sustain local social movements.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother, who has shown me through her own fearless brilliance that academic research and pedagogy, relationship and community building, and liberation struggle are all interrelated and ongoing. It is to your standard of excellence, that I hope this dissertation rises.

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List of Abbreviations

AAHAL	African American History Alliance of Louisiana
AAMA	African American Museums Association
ACLU	American Civil Liberties Union
ACNO	Arts Council of New Orleans
BOLD	Black Organization for Leadership Development
BOP	Black Organization of Police
BPP	Black Panther Party for Self-Defense
CAC	Contemporary Arts Center
CAP	Committee for Accountable Police
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
COFO	Council of Federated Organizations
COINTELPRO	Counter Intelligence Program
CORE	Congress of Racial Equality
COUP	Community Organization for Urban Politics
CPUSA	Communist Party USA
DOJ	Department of Justice
FAS	Felony Action Squad
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigations
FFLIC	Family and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children
FST	Free Southern Theater
JJPL	Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana
JPI	Junebug Productions Inc.
LCDC	Lawyers' Constitutional Defense Committee
LDA	Louisiana Division of the Arts

LMAAH	Louisiana Museum for African American History
LSU	Louisiana State University
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NGO	Non-governmental Organizational
NOI	Nation of Islam
NOPD	New Orleans Police Department
NOPS	New Orleans Public Schools
NPN	National Performance Network
NUL	National Urban League
OPPVL	Orleans Parish Progressive Voters' League
PANO	Patrolmen's Association of New Orleans
PBC	Police Brutality Committee
PHRF	Peoples' Hurricane Relief Fund
SCEF	Southern Conference Educational Found
SCLC	Southern Christian Leadership Council
SNCC	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
SOUL	Southern Organization for United Leadership
SSSC	Safe Streets Strong Communities
TFA	Teach for America
VA	Veterans Affairs
YMCA	Young Mens' Christian Association

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Introduction

In March 2010, I was fired from my job at the Roots of Music, because I sought to teach a structured, culturally-relevant (read: Afrocentric) curriculum designed to enhance literacy skills to a group of some 125 Black students during a 90 minute idle period in which children with no homework run wild. Instead, I was instructed that children with no homework were to sit quietly and write letters to daytime talk show hosts Oprah Winfrey and Ellen Degeneres, extolling the virtues of the Roots of Music after-school program and asking that they make monetary donations to the fledgling non-profit. After I had successfully taught the first session of my new curriculum, the founding director, a Black man born and raised in New Orleans – and a world renowned musician to boot – told me he didn't “want any of that Black shit” at his organization. “Black history is bullshit” he emphatically proclaimed. The way he saw it, I was “fighting a battle [I] can't win” because some of the very kids in his program were “going to get shot, going to get pregnant [...] going to jail” (D. Tabb. Personal communication, March 26, 2010). Ironically, on the Roots of Music website one of the main objectives of the program is to keep kids off the streets and thereby decrease the inevitability of incarceration, teenage pregnancies, or early death for Black youth throughout the city. Well at least that's what they told their funders.

Having been encouraged “to take the lead” on programming for homework hour by some of the instructors who were sick of the disruptions caused by rogue students, I thought that one way I could contribute to the mission of decreasing crime among so-called “at-risk,” Black youth would be to teach them to love themselves, to teach them that their lives were valuable and that each one of them had a place in their communities.

My Afrocentric curriculum attempted to encourage feelings of pride and self-worth, in addition to imparting the critical literacy skills necessary for success. The first day I implemented the new curriculum the kids ate it up. They had no desire to write and re-write letters begging celebrities for hand-outs; instead the students were excited and engaged as we sat in a circle reading African proverbs aloud and discussing our interpretations of them. While the staff were now happy that I had succeeded in creating order where there had been none, they did not see fit to give me free reign to implement my new program; I struggled to defend my standpoint and to rescue Black history from its perceived shitter, but in the end I was pushed out of the organization.

After being dismissed abruptly from the Roots of Music for “creating a hostile environment” (read: deigning to defend the value of Black people and our contributions to the world), I came to think differently about the social function of the arts – as commodities, communicative devices, and as political tools. The scales fell from my eyes, exposing the popular myths associated with Black leadership and Black cultural production. Perhaps a bit more cynical than when I first moved to New Orleans, I realized that the story I’d like to tell is one which 1) explores the contemporary freedom struggle in post-Katrina New Orleans and, 2) examines the possibilities and the limitations of Black social justice activism in its historical and aesthetic contexts.

In this dissertation, I attend to New Orleans’ fierce and famed legacy of resistance in order to contextualize today’s present struggles for freedom and justice. I do this by first, offering a brief survey of some of New Orleans’ more historic moments of resistance, namely the 1811 Slave Revolt, as well as its Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Secondly, I analyze the ways in which these historic moments and movements

continue to be drawn upon as sources of inspiration as well as conflict and tension within New Orleans' Black artist-activist community; finally, I trace the dynamic, recent history of institutional and interpersonal relationships which inform the contemporary landscape of NGOs and small businesses engaged in the work of community building. I follow both men and women, Movement "veterans," artists, culture bearers and entrepreneurs as I sketch a landscape filled with Black institutional presences as well as disappearances.

I focus my attention on local Black institutions, which, because they articulate art and culture-based, social justice missions, leave plenty of room for interpretation and poetic license. As such, many of the organizations I detail in the following chapters conceive of imaginative and original, and fully relevant ways to go about the work of "exiting the matrix," that is, the work of liberating Black minds and bodies from capitalist, white supremacist, heteropatriarchal domination. However, fusing art and activism also brings with it its own unique sets of limitations as egos and ideologies collide and Southern NGOs court Northern philanthropies for funding. Of course, none of this work occurs in a post-Katrina vacuum – no matter how many times pundits bandy about the phrase "blank slate" – and so I pay special attention to the political and economic contexts in which New Orleans culture is celebrated, produced and commodified.

Adventures in Anthropological Methods

We anthropologists feel a strange imperative to tell our arrival stories, and, in my case, it may indeed help to frame the issues I want to explore in this dissertation. I first arrived in New Orleans in the summer of 2007 on my way west from Atlanta and the first

U.S. Social Forum. There were plenty of representatives from New Orleans in attendance, and they provided an excellent standpoint from which to think about what was going on in New Orleans specifically, and in the country more generally, with regards to the displacement of poor people from city centers. The next summer, in 2008, I returned to New Orleans, but this time I stayed for the hottest months of the year – June, July and August – to conduct exploratory research. Having grown up in Boston, and having felt alienated by gentrification in, and ultimately displaced from, the very neighborhoods where I had come of age, I was particularly drawn to post-Katrina New Orleans and its struggles to rebuild and repopulate after the flood. I responded to a craigslist ad, and ended up living in what my housemate and landlord (a fellow “Masshole”) called “the wooden tent.” A young white woman, my same age, Stephanie had moved down from New York to consult on green building and design projects. She bought an old shotgun house in the St. Roch neighborhood, which was rather unevenly gentrifying, for a mere \$5,000 cash. Since she had been trained in building and design, she was taking it upon herself to rehab the house with her own two hands. The house, therefore, lacked anything in the way of insulation or even siding. My first night, sleeping under a noisy ceiling fan and thick mosquito net, I felt I was finally living up to the anthropological hype. Is this what Malinowski had felt?

As it turned out, I was living on what seemed like a small, racially-isolated island in the middle of a neighborhood predominated by poor Black families and rising numbers of Honduran day laborers. In the house to my immediate left lived a young white couple from California; the woman was a Teach for America (TFA) teacher in a local public school. On the other side of me was a shady, middle-aged, white contractor who would

turn a quick profit on all of his renovation projects by bringing in youth, church, and community-service groups to do the manual labor for free. (My dog hated him). Directly across the street was a house that had been converted into an art gallery. The thirty-something, white woman who owned the property had to incorporate her bed into each exhibit, as the gallery was, in fact, her live/work space. She had moved to the neighborhood pre-Katrina from California, although she had been raised in Guam; and when the post-Katrina land-grab ensued, she capitalized on it. She also owned several houses adjacent to her own; she left those houses in their original state of dilapidation and disrepair as they made for a more dramatic backdrop for her art exhibits and installations.

Not two houses over, the color line was abruptly drawn. Ms. Detrice and her daughter and three grandbabies lived on the corner of Music and Villere streets. From that corner all the way back towards Lake Ponchartrain the neighborhood was populated by Black families, New Orleanians, some of whom had always lived in this neighborhood, and some of whom – like Ms. Detrice and her family – had been relocated there from other parts of the city. Interspersed throughout were Honduran migrant workers, mostly men, although some were living with their families as well. Although there was growing awareness of a newly-emerging Latino community – as well as growing anxiety over what this might mean for New Orleans culture – demographic data for Orleans Parish showed that as of 2008, the city as a whole had only witnessed a two percent increase in the “Hispanic” population (Kaiser Foundation 2008: 46). But that two percent clearly had a huge impact on the way the city was now beginning to redefine itself.

Although I did not begin living in New Orleans permanently until the Fall of 2009, the contacts I made a year earlier proved to be lasting. My time in the St. Roch neighborhood led me to think about the ways in which post-Katrina, disaster-related displacement and gentrification worked hand-in-hand; I also began to examine the critical role that art and aesthetics were playing in the gentrification process as well as the rebuilding of communities across the city. However, it was not until I later returned to the city in 2009 that I began to investigate the responses of activist groups as well as individuals who were struggling to build and maintain a sense of home, support, and security in New Orleans.

During the course of my fieldwork, I cultivated and nurtured relationships with artists, cultural workers, and activists in New Orleans. I did this through a variety of activities, such as attending theater, poetry, and music performances. However, my involvement with the Roots of Music, if in problematic ways, and with Junebug Productions, Inc. (JPI) were by far the most fruitful in terms of introducing me to some of the major local players in the multifaceted world of non-profit (and) cultural organizing. Because I had been taken on as staff in both of these “Black-led” organizations, I was able to gain a kind of access that would have been otherwise impossible in a city like New Orleans where it is all about who you know and who knows (and can vouch for) you.

The Roots of Music is a free after school program that teaches middle-school children to read and play music in line with the tradition of parading brass bands. Many of the program’s instructors are professional musicians who themselves come from large, musically-gifted families, the stereotypical yet powerful reality of New Orleans

musicianship; because of the close relationships I was able to form with my colleagues at the Roots of Music, during the time that I worked with Roots of Music I was invited frequently to performances as well as board meetings where the pretenses of professionalism were dropped and we were able to speak freely about the conditions facing the city's young people and artists.

Junebug Productions, Inc. is a community-centered theater company dedicated to promoting socially relevant and collaboratively produced art; although it was founded in 1963 as a cultural arm of the Civil Rights Movement, only in the last decade or so has it solidified its organizational infrastructure. Because of JPI's local reputation and its extensive repertoire, I have been introduced to some of the city's most well known artists, activists, and business people. By working with both the Roots of Music, an organization in its infancy – it was only 3 years old in 2010 – and Junebug Productions, Inc., an organization some twenty years old, I began to learn about the distinct challenges faced by artists and activists in a city and state which emphasize and capitalize upon their “unique” cultural heritage. I was also given quite the lesson on what it means for an organization to call itself Black-led, given the amount of white people involved as staff, Board members, consultants, and supporters.

In 2010, I became a Board Member for the Louisiana Museum for African American History (LMAAH). Since then – bridging anthropology and activism – I have been active in planning and implementing their public lectures on local history and culture. My involvement with LMAAH, Roots of Music, and Junebug Productions has been an invaluable asset to my research, introducing me to collaborators and allowing me to get an insiders' view on Black-led non-profit work here in New Orleans. I have been

able to conduct a few formal interviews with staff members and countless more informal ones. I have attended public lectures, City Council meetings, organizer roundtables, cultural organizing workshops, and anti-racism trainings in addition to hanging out at small Black-owned businesses like coffee shops and bookstores.

The importance of interrogating myths

In getting to know Black-led, art and culture-based institutions in New Orleans, I was deliberately attempting to subvert the images and narratives conveyed to me by the national news media in the wakes of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. As a Black woman, born and raised in Boston, MA, before 2005 I had very little information, let alone understanding, of the cultural dynamics and structural forces shaping New Orleans. At the time the first of the 2005 killer hurricanes made landfall on August 29, I was living and working in Lake Andes, SD. Without money to take off from my job and travel to the Gulf Coast to assist with the relief efforts, I was captive in front of the television; I clipped New Orleans-related articles from any newspaper I could get my hands on; I kept a journal and I cried, and I seethed with anger about the depictions of and horrid conditions facing storm survivors, the tragic deaths of so many vulnerable people. Through the course of my fieldwork, I began to de-bunk myths about the city: popular myths that I myself had once believed, as well as myths perpetuated by scholarly sources.

This dissertation, therefore, attempts to take seriously and explore the various materials of speech both mythic and real that not only inform but also reflect political values and social actions in post-Katrina New Orleans. New Orleans'

national/international reputation is the product of centuries of myth-making. Well before hurricane Katrina overwhelmed the city's levy system, the myth of New Orleans' exceptionalism had already taken root. As North America's most prominent, "tropical" city, New Orleans in the late nineteenth century did seem an exception to Confederate rule. Although Reconstruction did not entail extensive rebuilding of New Orleans' physical infrastructure, Reconstruction did require substantial economic reorganization. It was during this era of state-sanctioned racial terror and capitalist consolidation that New Orleans business elites began to aggressively promote the city as a national tourist destination. This branding campaign would take on many forms, manufacturing myth from history, folklore and picturesque notions of "the tropical."

Folklorist William Bascom defines myth as "prose narratives which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past" (1965: 4). Both anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1955) and semiotician Roland Barthes (1984) also agree that myth is a part of human speech, a communicative tool. Moreover, Lévi-Strauss and Barthes agree with Bascom on the uniquely historical nature of myth – that is, myths are drawn from the raw material of history; however, Barthes contends that myth is reductive. For Barthes, myth is violently abstracted from its historical and social contexts given that "when it becomes form, the meaning leaves its contingency behind; it empties itself, it becomes impoverished, history evaporates, only the letter remains" (1984: 5). Emptied of its particular contexts, Lévi-Strauss emphasizes that the substance of myth lies in "the *story* which it tells" (1955: 430).

A key figure in the birth of "modern" anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, on the other hand, did not seem very interested in the historical nature of myth. In fact, he

concedes the point that myth is “a story told” but goes a step further when he proclaims that myth is also “a reality lived” (1954 [1926]: 177); as such, he believed it had an “indispensable function:”

it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilization; *it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force*; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom (ibid loc. cit).

Tropicalizing New Orleans, mythologizing the place

In *An Eye for the Tropics*, Krista Thompson elucidates the connectedness of (neo)colonial regimes of power, the manufacturing of what she terms “the picturesque” – in which a literal picture or photograph comes to stand in for a place, and a people, and the production of desire for travel, for consumption, for sex, for a taste of the extraordinary. Indeed, many landscapes both urban and rural have been transformed by the process of tropicalization – itself a form of place-based myth-making – which “describes the complex visual systems through which the islands were imaged for tourist consumption and the social and political implications of these representations on actual physical space[s]” as well as the users of those spaces (Thompson 2006: 5). And even though “tropicalization delineates how certain ideals and expectations of the tropics informed the creation of place-images in some Anglophone Caribbean islands” (ibid loc.cit), the process certainly holds true for other Caribbean locales as well – and, indeed, for New Orleans.

For example, while carnival in New Orleans today is known for its practices of masking and masquerade, these did not become characteristic of New Orleans carnival

culture until the Spanish introduced it during their brief period of rule over Louisiana (1763-1803). During this period, “public masked balls emerged as an important component of the cultural life in New Orleans but were later suppressed in 1781 due to fears among Spanish rulers that cavorting among the different classes, races, and ethnic groups at the balls would encourage revolt” (Gotham 2007: 24). The Spanish rulers of New Orleans, and of Louisiana more generally, understood that “all were considered equal during carnival. Here in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age” (Bahktin 1984: 10). Indeed, the Spanish rulers of New Orleans saw the informal parades and spontaneous celebrations, and feared that this temporary suspension “of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (ibid loc.cit) would lead to the oppressed masses demanding a more egalitarian, if not carnivalesque, society. Finally, “in the early 1820s, the New Orleans City Council lifted its ban on public masked balls, marking the end of restrictions against masking and heralding the beginning of a new era of *bals masques*” (Gotham 2007: 24).

A defining feature of the new antebellum era of carnival was its free-for-all nature; “during the 1830s and 1840s, almost all the street processions were small, unorganized, irregular, and relatively spontaneous celebrations” (ibid 26). In this sense, New Orleans carnival exemplified Bahktin’s assertions that “carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators [...] carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people [...] such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants” (Bahktin 1984: 7). However, it was the Mardi Gras

celebration of 1857 that transformed carnival from its more humble, spontaneous beginnings to the more ostentatious event that tourists travel far and wide to see today. “On this day, the Mystick Krewe of Comus, an organized group of several dozen elites, staged their first themed parade and tableaux ball, a development that represented a new distinctive form of elite cultural production” (Gotham 2007: 30-31). Perhaps tellingly, this parade took place in the same year as the infamous Dred Scott case in which Scott, an enslaved Black man, sued his master for his freedom when taken into the “free” Wisconsin territory. The transformation and overhaul of carnival, once a vibrant and spontaneous multi-racial celebration, was an attempt to foreclose the possibility of liberation from the established order once and for all.

To ensure that Mardi Gras carnival would be both rational and bourgeois, the Comus Krewe established an exclusive social club to coordinate public, night-time processions complete with themed parades and floats. Comus also “staged an invitation-only tableaux ball at the end of their parade where only members of the Krewe were in mask and costume” (ibid 32). This quickly became the standard for carnival celebrations, and exclusive, all-white, all-male social clubs and Krewes flourished.

The appearance of exclusive New Orleans social clubs and Krewes greatly intensified during the antebellum period, but coincided with the process of Americanization that all of Louisiana had been undergoing since 1803. In 1809, some 10,000 French-speaking immigrants arrived in New Orleans from St. Domingue by way of Cuba. The refugees doubled the size of the Francophone community practically overnight (Dessens 2007). “With the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, the United States set out to impose both its rule and its customary racial dualism on a society in which

Americans – and whites – constituted a minority” (Hirsch 1992: 307). Upon arrival the St. Domingans immediately revitalized the culture of New Orleans, publishing the city’s first newspaper, and turning the *bals masques* into a spectacle of sexual prowess in what would come to be known as “Quadroon Balls” (Dessens 2007).

Of the 10,000 Francophone newcomers, roughly one-third of them were Free People of Color, whose presence ensured (for a time) the continuation of a tripartite racial caste system in New Orleans not unlike the racial systems of categorization that were seen in other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America. But this three-tiered racial system would not last forever: “Ironically, a floodtide of European immigrants after 1830, particularly the Irish, Americanized New Orleans and Anglicized the Catholic Church” (Hirsch 1992: 307). Being that carnival had been officially seized and presided over by the elite social clubs and Krewes, the social and cultural transformations taking place in New Orleans during the latter half of the nineteenth century reflected the slow decline of the longstanding Francophone culture and political influence, and the rise of a powerful Anglo-Saxon bourgeoisie (Gotham 2007).

Reconstruction in New Orleans and throughout Louisiana was a violently contested process wherein men of all colors sought to re-imagine the social contract. During this period, Mardi Gras celebrations couldn’t help but take on a politicized bent. In 1873, for example, the Krewe of Comus parade and ball took as its theme the “Missing Links to Darwin’s Origins of the Species” (ibid 32). At this parade, “President Ulysses S. Grant was portrayed as a tobacco grub and Benjamin Butler – Union occupier of New Orleans during the Civil War – was transformed into a hyena. Enshrined on a throne was

a banjo-playing gorilla, a telling symbol of the violent reassertion of white supremacy that was already underway in the city” (Smith 2011).

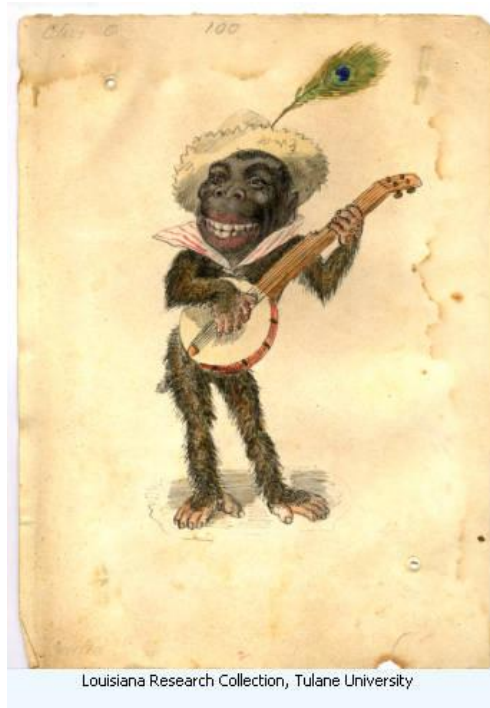


Figure 1: “Gorilla.” Charles Briton’s 1873 sketch of a Comus costume design.

By 1877, when federal troops were evacuated from the South, the U.S. Supreme Court declared unconstitutional the Civil Rights Act of 1875 that had provided Black people – now American citizens – with the right to equal treatment in public places and transportation. From this time forth, carnival was to become “a cultural vehicle for displaying racial ideology, constructing [white] racial identity, and reinforcing social exclusion through parades and balls” (ibid 39). For example, at the Mardi Gras celebration of 1877, Comus’ theme was “the ‘Aryan Race,’ a celebration that chronicled the so-called accomplishments of European males in the development of Western civilization” (ibid 39). In essence, the rise of modern carnival was thanks to the legislative efforts of Anglo and Francophone white men to restrict the public rights of

Black people and people of color. In turn, white social and political elites used culture as a vehicle through which to “impose new forms of social exclusion, segregation, and rationalization over the [carnival] celebration as expedients to attracting tourists to New Orleans” (ibid 43-44).

But carnival wasn’t simply a racial project: the exclusive Clubs and KreweS aimed for carnival to become big business. After the Civil War all but destroyed New Orleans’ local economy, planning and promoting Mardi Gras festivities took on a new meaning for the city’s commercial and industrial elites; carnival became a national tourist attraction and was aggressively marketed as such. The process by which this was done is a North American example of Thompson’s theory of tropicalization with carnival its main symbol.

Cathy Stanton (2005) notes that cities and towns whose main industry has either fled or atrophied often attempt to rescue an aestheticized past in order to attract would-be tourists and city consumers. This is precisely what took place in post-bellum New Orleans, and it has continued, steadily intensifying since the city hosted the last World’s Fair in 1984. Public art/history projects tend to put distance between the past and its contemporary representation through the “reciprocity of disappearance and exhibition” (31). In New Orleans this dynamic plays out in that tourists and consumers are lured to the city because of its vibrant culture (mainly music, food, architecture, and carnival) while the culture-bearers are disappeared; the products of their creative labor, however, are exalted, exhibited and commodified.

John Hannigan (1998) describes the social and class relations corresponding to the revitalized centrality of cultural production for urban economics, making reference to

the tension between visibility and disappearance as well. In *Fantasy City*, there are stark divisions between inhabitant and visitor as officials and tourism boosters strive to brand their city as a unique destination hot spot; the role of consumers are downsized to that of passive recipients of culture, and the owners/investors/developers come to stand in for the cultural producer whose historical and material context for production has been disappeared from public view. In the Big Easy, the markers of this historical and material context have hardly vanished, however: As in so many places across the south, monuments, museums and other institutions, school and street names serve to preserve the history of white supremacist violence which created the conditions for the accumulation of wealth for white elites.

And these markers are everywhere! At Lee Circle in the Central Business District stands the tallest statue in the city – Robert E. Lee; around the corner sits the Confederate Memorial Hall; next to that is the Ogden Museum – official museum of the University of New Orleans -- named after the self-proclaimed “general” of the White League, the paramilitary arm of the reactionary white elite; as if defending the entrance to the New Orleans Museum of Art, General Beauregard looms 27 feet in height astride a prancing horse; the Jeff Davis monument on the corner of Canal Street and Jefferson Davis Highway depicts him with outstretched hand; and the white supremacy monument, an obelisk – how ironic given that the form it takes was “borrowed” from the ancient Kemetic peoples who were Black – hidden, now, behind the Canal Place mall parking lot once stood prominently placed on Canal Street¹ to memorialize the White League’s violent overthrow of the city’s Reconstruction government in 1874.

¹ The monument erected in 1891 stood on Canal Street until 1989.

As if the presence of those monuments weren't enough, the patron saint of the city's public schools, John McDonough, was one of the richest slaveholders in the state; to this day more than a few schools, now attended almost exclusively by Black students, bear his name. Thanks to Black organizing, the city no longer celebrates him annually by coercing schoolchildren to march to Lafayette Square and dance around the maypole in his honor. New Orleans, like Hannigan's "fantasy" city, is a space of restricted (political) movement and imagination for inhabitants and visitors alike given that everywhere white supremacy is inscribed and naturalized onto the landscape.

Even with so many indicators of New Orleans' rather unexceptional participation in the distinctly American brands of exploitative modes of social organization, capitalist modes of production, and white supremacy, what makes the mythic nature of New Orleans' exceptional "tropicality" or Caribbean-ness so strong is its ritual aspect: in other words, folks are apt to believe and disseminate myths about how New Orleans carnival serves to subvert the standing racial hierarchy because they can come as tourists and experience it themselves by participating in collective rituals like Mardi Gras, Second Line parades, or a simple stroll down Bourbon Street. In some of the more tourist-heavy locales, one might see plenty of racial phenotypes represented as they shout up at the passing floats, "throw me something, mister!!!"

People who don't know much about New Orleans assume that Mardi Gras, the colorful public ritual which swells to a delirious climax before the muted tones of Lent set in, acts as something of an equalizer in which people across the color spectrum celebrate together, subverting the structures and institutions which uphold a multifaceted matrix of oppression. This may be the case for tourists on Bourbon Street, but this

couldn't be further from the truth when it comes to the traditional celebrations which happen during New Orleans festival season.

While many whites celebrated Mardi Gras in the French Quarter, or further upriver along St. Charles Avenue, thousands of black revelers crowded Claiborne Avenue, lined with make-shift stands which sold all sorts of food and drink, while itinerant musicians entertained. Impromptu parading by black "Indian" tribes who bore little resemblance to Native Americans could be found throughout. "Marching bands" of as few as two musicians could readily attract "second lines" of black maids and porters dressed as baby dolls or movie stars, while ordinary black longshoremen and other unskilled workers were often masked as cowboys or gangsters (Cassimere Jr. 2013).

Clubs and Krewes which parade down the main thoroughfares also throw lavish parties for their members and in the majority of instances these social organizations are cleaved along strict racial lines.²

There were no black Carnival parading clubs until the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club began parading during WWI. Its original working class members used more imagination than money to put on a "poor man's" parade which spoofed whites. Make-shift floats paled in comparison to their white counterparts. Probably, their shoddy appearance protected them from whites who would have resented any suggestion that they were social equals. King Zulu dressed in blackface [raffia skirt, and afro wig], presented coconuts to his subjects (Cassimere Jr. 2013).

Of course, the Krewe of Rex boasts an all-white membership, and its annual ball is an invitation-only event. On the other hand, the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club sells general admission tickets to its annual event; non-Black party-goers attend, but usually within larger, majority-Black groups of friends. Both of these Krewes send parades down the city streets on Fat Tuesday, but, interestingly, they take different routes throughout the city. While Rex and Zulu both begin their parade routes in Uptown New

² Some of the more contemporary Clubs and Krewes are attracting mixed racial membership bases, but this is a very recent phenomenon.

Orleans, Zulu continues to wind through the historic Treme neighborhood, while Rex ends its trek on Canal Street. If you are Black in New Orleans on Fat Tuesday, you will most likely end up dancing under the I-10 overpass on Claiborne and Orleans; just follow the bounce music as it echoes off the cement pillars. A few white and other non-Black faces might pepper the crowd, but this is most definitely a working class Black celebration.

Because the myth of Mardi Gras as a social equalizer for New Orleans “relaxed” racial atmosphere stands in such stark contrast to the racial realities of the city, it would seem as though it reflects a desire for racial harmony, a desire to be better than our collective histories. But desire and change are not always twin travelers, however, and so the epistemologies of the myth’s believers are revealed. They understand the world in such a way that to party together becomes truly indicative of racial progress; to participate in public culture is to be liberated from the everyday normalcy of de facto segregation. Race relations, rather than being about an integrated system of white supremacy, are understood as being about the intimate scale of interpersonal interactions. Thus, the myth of the exotic New Orleans also serves to obscure and obfuscate the social, economic, and political systems and structures which continue to oppress and exploit the majority of the city’s population. Ultimately, New Orleans’ mythic reputation is little more than a smokescreen, mystifying its terrifying realities.

Demystifying the instrumentalization of culture

This dissertation, then, attempts to demystify the social and cultural forces shaping the city and the realities that many city residents experience in their daily lives.

What emerges in the pages that follow is a multi-vocal discussion of hopes and possibilities for the just and ethical rebuilding of one of the U.S.'s most beloved cities and tourist destinations, as well as the internal and external limitations or impediments to social transformation. An example of the way in which possibilities and limitations compete against and counteract one another can be found in examining the ways in which New Orleanians not only talk about but also seek to instrumentalize culture, using it as political and social tool for discipline and control.

The ruling elites in New Orleans from the beginning have sought to use “culture” as a means by which to manipulate and control enslaved Africans. By allowing African peoples to gather at Congo Square; Carnival; Second Lines; Mardi Gras parades; music festivals like Jazz Fest, Essence Fest, and Voodoo Fest, for instance, the white ruling class has been able to ensure the use of a series of social pressure valves which release energy that might otherwise be used pursuing freedom. Historian Albert Thrasher discusses the importance of the “seasoning” process to the entire slave regime. He notes that as “on the slave ship, ‘seasoning’ also required a large dose of compulsory dancing. It was observed that rigorous and regular dancing tended to ‘cool out’ and pacify some slaves and cut down on their resistance” (1995: 32). As a matter of fact, however, Africans and their Creole kin imbued cultural performances with the spirit of resistance anyway, as exemplified in the popular Mardi Gras Indian saying “we won’t bow down.” In many treatments of New Orleans history and culture (Hall 1992; Gotham 2007; Flaherty 2010), this is where the discussion of cultural resistance seemingly begins and ends. By contrast, this dissertation aims to begin from the point of resistance. In other words, I will endeavor to use New Orleans’ culture of resistance as a starting point to

pick up where authors like Flaherty (2010), Moore (2010) and others leave off, by adding historical complexity and context to more contemporary models of struggle and protest in New Orleans.

I borrow my definitions of struggle, protest, and activism from the famous feminist adage “the personal is political.” Black feminist theorizing has attempted to give voice to people, lives and experiences that too often go unheard, by famously offering the concept of the simultaneity of oppression (Crenshaw 1990; Collins 1990); “that is, race, class, gender are conceptualized as combining various ways that are always historical and contextual” (McClaurin 2001: 34). Likewise, Black feminist anthropology aims to move beyond the simple inclusion of Black people and women as suitable subjects of scholarly inquiry and “toward the development of a goal of understanding social relations of power, women’s individual and collective identities, and the fabric of meaning and value in society relative to sex roles” (ibid 32-33). Black feminist anthropology exhibits “concern for elucidating the constitution of social inequality and people’s varied responses to it” (ibid 15). Moreover, feminist anthropologists have offered theories of resistance to inequality that act as diagnostics of social power (Abu-Lughod 1990; Ortner 1995). Investigating particular forms of resistance goes a long way in revealing the specific ways in which the state-sponsored and privately-funded processes of neighborhood rebuilding after Katrina are restructuring social relationships.

Examining instances of personal and collective action, this dissertation draws from Patricia Hill Collins’ framework for evaluating Black feminist activism. Collins’ theory of activism goes far beyond the politics of public protest, rather she attends to the “unofficial,” and “seemingly invisible spheres of social life and organization” (1990:

202). She observes that forms of activism largely consist of “trying to create spheres of influence, authority, and power within institutions that traditionally have allowed African-Americans and women little formal authority or real power” (ibid 209). Collins also cites the work of cultural preservation as important in everyday resistance to white supremacy because, when done in the spirit of community, “efforts to preserve ‘Blackness’” (ibid 206) take on political meaning in the context of proximate and interlocking systems of oppression that perpetuate negative and controlling images of Black children, men and women. Because I want to explore the contingent, and lived experiences of race, class, and gender in post-Katrina New Orleans, this study offers an ethnography of urban transformation with a critical eye toward power dynamics, gendered divisions of labor, and the cultural politics of race as expressed within community-based arts organizations as well as the everyday social relations and aesthetics of rebuilding.

By adding ethnographic scope to the treatment of New Orleans’ famous legacy of Black resistance, it becomes clear that myth-making has aided the historical suppression of a true understanding of African and Revolutionary histories. In place of true history, “we are forced to produce the truth of power that our society demands, of which it has need, in order to function” (Gordon 1980: 93). This exercise of power, however, reproduces “subjugated” knowledge and informs both the forms and aesthetics that struggle and protest take in contemporary New Orleans. Not only does Foucault’s subjugated knowledge show up in organized struggle, but also it shows up in James C. Scott’s “hidden transcripts,” everyday cultural practices which embody, albeit ever so subtly, political dissent. Hidden transcripts can be said to be a momentary insurrection of

subjugated knowledge, a spontaneous attempt at liberation from the overwhelming matrix of oppression in which we are all entwined. The tensions between power and knowledge, visibility and disappearance, resistance and performance can be seen at work when it comes to the conditions under which Black New Orleanians struggle, survive and celebrate.

Public Congregation has evolved to become a flexible, cultural form in which Black New Orleanians attempt to mediate the tensions mentioned above; it is a ritual act of group survival which seeks to create and mobilize a uniquely Black sphere of influence in order to preserve notions of African heritage and Black pride. Public Congregation is a tangible example of how culture is both an arena for struggle as well as an easy means of co-optation. It is important to understand this particular cultural form because, while, indeed, Black people are restricted from certain sectors of the labor and housing markets, it is a hard sell to argue that in a Black majority city known for its second line and parade culture, that the movements of Black people are restricted entirely. Rather, Monique Moss, a Choreographer and Dance Historian, born and bred in New Orleans observes:

Congregation has served as a vital cultural rite and civil right in the lives of the people of African descent for centuries as this function of cultural transmission is inevitably alive and visible in the streets of present-day New Orleans. Struggles associated with the right of peoples of African descent to gather as a collective body has been a recurring theme in the history of New Orleans that can be traced as far back as 17th century France when King Louis XIV issued Les Codes Noirs, precedent of the Black Codes, to be enforced as a governing doctrine for its French colonies... Home to the traditions of second lines, Mardi Gras Indian tribes, social aid and pleasure clubs and jazz funerals, each of these traditions unique in its own rites yet dependent on the right of the people to congregate, New Orleans, continues to endure the mechanisms and phenomena of past and modern times that heavily impact the preservation of African-based cultural traditions (2008).

Historians of the Black experience in the Americas echo the importance of congregation to the inner lives of a captive people. Earl Lewis writes:

Southern Black folk turned segregation into “congregation”... [which] symbolized an act of free will, whereas segregation represented the imposition of another’s will... [African Americans] discovered, however, that congregation in a Jim Crow environment produced more space than power. They used this space to gather their cultural bearings, to mold the urban setting (quoted in Kelley 1993: 45).

While Robin Kelley adds that

“Congregation” enables Black communities to construct and enact a sense of solidarity; to fight with each other; to maintain and struggle over a collective memory of oppression and pleasure, degradation and dignity; to debate what it means to be “Black,” “Negro,” “Colored,” and so forth (ibid 51).

And John O’Neal, Founding Director of Junebug Productions, Inc., Civil Rights veteran and playwright, as well as long-time resident of New Orleans, makes clear that the notion of “public congregation” is of uniquely African import when he writes: “In Africa, music and dance are vital parts of the culture, are not separated from everyday life and provide the context that nurtures New Orleans’ culture” (O’Neal 2008).

Historically, rituals of public congregation took place throughout the city, but its most famous and beloved site was reserved for Congo Square. Situated behind the city proper (today’s French Quarter), this green expanse was already a significant cultural site before African peoples decided to make it their gathering place:

In a history of New Orleans, John Kendall specified a type of gathering that occurred near this portage stating that before the foundation of the city, Native Americans celebrated their own feasts in the vicinity of Congo Square. Although Kendall did not identify the nation or nations that hosted those festivals, the Quinipissa, Acolapissa, Ouma (Houma), Chitimachas, Tunicas, and Bayougoulas among others are known to have, at some point resided or camped in the area that became New Orleans... according to local lore, they considered the area of Congo Square to be holy ground” (Evans 2011: 9).

Because of the raucous nature of the African rituals and celebrations, the New Orleans political elite attempted to confine African social gatherings to specific areas and neighborhoods; in 1817 a city ordinance successfully confined African congregants to *Place Congo* or Congo Square – today a part of the Louis Armstrong Park (Evans 2011; Gotham 2007). At Congo Square, “slaves recently from Africa were allowed to spend

Sunday afternoons dancing and singing and remembering their African heritage” (Donaldson 1984: 63). Indeed, historian Freddi Evans asserts “Congo Square in New Orleans was central to the survival, preservation, and dissemination of African-derived performance practices which influenced local as well as national popular culture” (2011: 2). At Congo Square African performers danced and sang, forming multiple concentric rings, each of which represented different nationalities and/or cultural groups (Donaldson 1984).

Yet visitors to Congo Square witnessed more than singing and dancing. It was there that enslaved Africans and free people of African descent “were engaged in important social activities beyond the obvious singing and dancing. For instance, a religion, Voodoo, was in common practice there, and even a crude economic system developed among those attending the activities” (Donaldson 1984: 63); “long-standing oral history has held that enslaved Africans were sold in Congo Square, and a city ordinance of 1829 supports this assertion” (Evans 2011: 20). Additionally, Congo Square was also the location of all executions, save one, that officials carried out in New Orleans between 1803 and 1834, and sources indicate that some of those executed were of African heritage” (ibid loc.cit).

While Congo Square was an integral site of Black racial and cultural identity formation, it was also a space of multiracial social intercourse. The neighborhood that developed adjacent to Congo Square

“took the name Tremé from its owner, who in 1810 subdivided a large portion of his property and sold it as house plots. The new land owners included colonial settlers and white immigrants from Saint Domingue; however, the majority of them were free people of color -- and mostly women. Many of the people of color were also immigrants from Saint Domingue (Evans 2011: 19).

Even in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the festivities at Congo Square attracted many visitors and drew amongst its tourists and voyeurs the “best class of whites” (Donaldson 1984: 66). In fact, “not only did the gatherings evolve as a tourist attraction, they were equally as popular among locals” (Evans 2011: 36). Evans notes that many of these whites went on to become famous writers, composers and minstrel performers, laying the foundation for American literary arts, music, theater and dance; among the frequent spectators at Congo Square’s Sunday gatherings included George Washington Cable, Louis Gottschalk, and E.P. Christy.³ To be sure, many of the festivities and celebrations held at Congo Square provided the cultural framework for later and more “modern” iterations of New Orleans carnival.

While Congo Square served as an important cultural hub for American Indians and later for Africans during the colonial period, today it is used extremely selectively for purposes of Public Congregation. For example: Congo Square hosts the annual Maafa Commemoration, a solemn ceremony honoring the lives of those who endured the Middle Passage, sponsored by local Black-led arts organizations and cultural workers and takes place every July 4th. There is also the Congo Square Rhythms Festival held every Fall, sponsored by the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Foundation, which also manages Jazz Fest. Although the festivals at Congo Square must be approved by the city’s largest and most influential white-led cultural institution, contemporary moments of public congregation in Congo Square, as elsewhere, nonetheless include expressions of joy, pride, collective unity and place-based identity. Given the strategic uses of public congregation and its reliance upon physically overwhelming public spaces by walking,

³ Cable was one of New Orleans’ most famous novelists, while Gottschalk and Christy were both composers. Christy also enjoyed a prominent career as an actor and stage producer, founding the troupe “Christy’s Minstrels.”

dancing, singing, shouting and playing music, it seems altogether possible to define the practice of public congregation as the creation of “a space of enunciation” (De Certeau 1984: 98).

Exploring institutional and interpersonal dynamics: a chapter by chapter breakdown

In each of the chapters of the dissertation I aim to illuminate the institutional and interpersonal dynamics as well as the external structural forces which color the choices open to Black activists and culture bearers in New Orleans seeking to engage in politicized cultural praxis. The first chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to discussing contemporary social scientific understandings of the forces shaping Black subjectivity. Reviewing the literature on the Black ghetto in light of the major historical debates about Blackness (is it racial? Is it cultural?), it becomes clear that the Katrina disaster served as a race-making experience, one in which racial stigmatization is socially and politically reproduced with the use of state-sanctioned violence. A survey of the so-called “Katrina Literature” illustrates the ways in which both willful as well as unwitting acts of violence have been institutionalized in the fields of healthcare, education, law enforcement, emergency preparedness and response, labor, housing and urban planning.

In chapter 2, I raise the question of New Orleans’ exceptionalism, and provide a brief survey of the historical context contributing to the city’s ever-shifting “racial tectonics” (Baker 2001). I find it important to write about the history of New Orleans, not only to better understand the social, political, and economic conditions under which Black New Orleanians are living, but also to offer a counterpoint to the popular literary, ethnographic and historical works which tend to exoticize the culture, apologize for

slavery, and romanticize resistance. I then circle back around to examine how Black people themselves have used historical events, narratives, and tropes to speak to contemporary urgencies. In this chapter I aim to raise the questions of who is authorized to tell the story of New Orleans and who benefits from its tellings.

In chapter 3, I take a closer look at New Orleans' infamous "culture of resistance" by examining local models and principles around which Black people have organized towards the goal of racial equality and social justice. I begin my discussion of local organizing with the McCarthy period of the early 1950s, which in many ways acts as a nodal point which carries along the history of white supremacist backlash to Black and Creole assertions of dignity, equality and justice. At the same time, the McCarthy era in the South at least, also foreshadowed the ways in which patriotism would function in post-September 11 America. Particularly in New Orleans, there were many avenues through which one might get involved in "the Movement." However, organizations like the NAACP and CORE came to dominate the institutional landscape of struggle. Both the NAACP and CORE operated as two sides of the same coin, a two-pronged attack that focused more on product than process, thus leaving a lack of direction and leadership once the organizations either dissipated or lost their immediate relevance. I argue that today one sees so many different community-based groups all working on different issues and trying to improve disparate facets of the Black experience because the top-down, one-size-fits-all approaches to movement work did not fit, as many of the local people tended to disagree with tactics or found certain campaigns irrelevant to their daily lives.

Drawing on Kim Fortun's term, Chapter 4 identifies particular "enunciatory communities," or collectivities engaged in disaster related advocacy after Katrina. These

types of communities often give voice to social protest movements informed by the specificity of place and the advocacy of local interests. In New Orleans, many such enunciatory communities engage in advocacy related to the social disasters resulting from mass incarceration, the war on drugs, and the shrinking of public sector safety nets for the poor. In efforts to generate widespread appeal and visibility, enunciatory communities find themselves coalescing around musical, performative and aesthetic traditions, and many grassroots, non-profit organizations use artful storytelling and the oral tradition as tools for community organizing. Foucault says “we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth” (Gordon 1980: 93); one of the ways in which Black New Orleanians are attempting to produce and popularize their own truths is through theater. Chapter 4 will examine the impact that movement-based Black theater group *Free Southern Theater* has had on the contemporary political landscape by illuminating the shifting constellations of alliances between and amongst social justice and arts organizations in New Orleans.

Chapter 5 introduces the gendered dynamics within the constellation of contemporary Black female-led arts and social justice organizations. This chapter juxtaposes the models and styles of leadership and activism originated by male-led and female-led institutions. This chapter asks, in what ways are the enunciatory communities within the art and activism set cleaved along gendered lines?

Finally, chapter 6 closes out the dissertation by presenting the case of the Louisiana Museum of African American History (LMAAH). Looking at the appropriation of the western form (the museum) which stems from the problematic history of American Anthropology, it becomes clear that LMAAH is participating in

what Anthropologist Lee Baker calls the “Heritage” school of thinking as regards U.S. Black identity. In many ways LMAAH is another member of the post-Katrina enunciatory community of Black activists concerned not only with social justice, but also with cultural preservation. On the other hand, there are differences in aesthetic choices, audience development strategies, and daily operations that uniquely affect LMAAH as a museum as well as a grassroots organization. These differences have consequences all their own.

Each chapter of this dissertation can easily stand on its own as a case study of the dynamics which both empower and obstruct the post-Katrina challenge of community building; however, in sum the chapters tell a story which is much larger in scale and universal in its appeal. This is a story about people who are responding to the structural and institutional interactions which have depleted inner cities of their capital – in all its forms. It’s a story which picks up well after organized social movements based on racial, economic and gender equality seem to have fallen silent or gone underground. The tools, strategies, and visions of actors and activists comprise the agency with which people like Baba John O’Neal, Mama Carol Bebelle, Mr. Malcolm Suber, Mama Vera Warren, and Mr. Leon Waters attempt to guide younger generations in continued struggle.

Reviewing the literature on Blackness, the ghetto, and the Katrina experience

It was not long after Hurricane Katrina had so forcefully overwhelmed New Orleans' levy systems that a veritable cottage industry of "Katrina Literature" appeared in academic journals, popular science magazines, philanthropic, humanitarian and governmental reports, and social justice press houses. Moreover, by 2006, several books had been published casting new light on the catastrophe (Brinkley 2006; Cooper 2006; Dyson 2006; Hartman 2006; Miller 2006; Troutt 2006; Van Dyk 2006; Van Heerden 2006). Unanimously, these authors, and many of the authors who'd go on to publish about New Orleans' storm and survivors, agree with countless social scientists in their interpretations of disaster as both an event and a process. The emerging Katrina literature, like the social science literature concerning disaster and calamity, suggests that catastrophic effects are *not* inevitable; rather, "they reflect the conscious choices made by political and economic decision-makers and implemented by public and private institutions" (Hartman 2006: 6). Instead of feigning shock as the ugly realities and brutal consequences of patriarchal white supremacist capitalism were abruptly spotlighted by national and international news coverage, Hartman and Squires argue in *There's No Such Thing as a Natural Disaster* – and the contributing authors illustrate – the manifold ways in which "Katrina is in fact a shorthand for a set of economic, social, and political conditions that characterize most of metropolitan America" (ibid 3).

That being said, it stands to reason that some context in the areas of race and urban theories as they relate to Black identity and experience is necessary; race, as so many theorists have noted, is an arbitrary, specious, even horrifying conceit, and yet it

has very powerful real world effects. Certainly, the Katrina disaster injuriously affected so many Black men, women, and children. This chapter attempts to make sense of the contemporary literature on Black culture and identity, while providing a survey of the social science observations and interpretations of the Black ghetto. This brief survey serves to lay the basis for understanding both the form and content of social justice movement and community building strategies deployed by Black New Orleanians in the wake of the Katrina disaster. Concluding the chapter, I discuss the social science literature which critically responds to and examines the Katrina disaster and its aftermath. A review of this literature reveals the particular historical moment in which Black New Orleanians are participating; the challenges to which Black New Orleanians are compelled to rise; and the nature of the “fierce urgency of now” (King, Jr. 1963) – almost a decade after the Katrina disaster.

The literatures on Black identity, the Black urban experience, and the impact and meaning of the Katrina disaster are each immensely helpful in defining the parameters of the present study. For example, how might I begin to identify “informants” without an understanding of who exactly is “Black” and who is not? While the literature on identity seems full of fluidity and at some times even contradiction, I understand scholars of the African Diaspora to maintain an open-ended definition of both Black subjectivity and Black culture. My own definition of Blackness reads something like the following: any person who, because of her color and/or other racialized traits such as hair texture, or body shape, must make a personal and often times political meaning out of 1) honoring the collective memory of enslavement, 2) reconciling the ambiguous and in many cases repressed relationship to Africa as a homeland at once real and imagined, and 3)

surviving the physical and structural violence to which Black people the world over are subject.

Of course, the literature on the Black ghetto adds yet another dimension to the experience and definition of Blackness in the context of the twentieth century U.S. and beyond. This literature is relevant because it not only sheds ethnographic light on the conditions in which the everyday lives of millions of Black Americans survive and thrive, but also the Black ghetto literature reveals the ways in which physical violence has been largely, though not entirely, usurped by structural violence. Drake and Cayton (1945) offer the clearest understanding when they write that the restrictive covenant has successfully replaced the home bombings, threats and intimidation that so many Black Belt residents were met with during the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, the Katrina literature has done much to reveal that although white supremacist violence in the form of various white leagues has subsided in the U.S. South, the use of police terrorism has in many ways served the same oppressive function; the criminalization of storm survivors and the militarization of disaster relief efforts proved how integral the use of violence is and has been in the race-making project all along.

Theoretical understandings of Blackness

Nineteenth and Twentieth century American Anthropology has given us the notion that race is an inherent biological trait. The field and its more outspoken practitioners have also sought to reverse this edict by asserting that race is, in fact, a social construct with very little – if any – biological, scientific evidence to support race-

based claims. While the race-as-social-construct school of thought may seem obvious to some, it is a helpful analytic because it highlights all those aspects we have come to think about as racial characteristics and it offers correlating (pseudo-) academic discourses, legal precedents, and popular culture phenomena which have informed the development of race-thinking and exposed the race-making process. On the other hand, “Anthropology – and for quite definite historical reasons, American cultural anthropology more specifically – has often been taken as providing what we might call the foundational discourse for the cultural politics of identity among peoples of African descent in the New World” (Scott 1991, 2).

In New Orleans, in particular, it is important to know about the discourses circulating around Black identity precisely because this city is one which has been cast as exceptional – at least in the U.S. American context. Because many historians, anthropologists, residents, and culture-bearers identify this place as Caribbean in its rhythms, cuisine, and social mores, it is important to understand the racial, social and cultural dynamics to which they are referring.

Stuart Hall, writing about Caribbean cultural identity, argues that constructing the Caribbean cultural imaginaries are three presences to be reckoned with: the African, the European, and the American. Importantly, the “*Présence Africaine* is the site of the repressed. Apparently silenced beyond memory by the power of the experience of slavery, Africa “could not be represented directly” (Hall 1996, 116) in dance, language, food, or spiritual belief. Instead, Africa as the mother of varying diasporic civilizations represents an “aporia” located at the core of Black identity.

This Triangle is, after all, ‘centered’ in Africa. Africa is the name of the missing term, the great aporia, which lies at the center of our cultural identity and gives it a meaning which, until recently, it lacked. No one who looks at these textural images now, in the

light of the history of transportation, slavery, and migration, can fail to understand how the rift of separation, the “loss of identity”, which has been integral to the Caribbean experience only begins to be healed when these forgotten connections are once more set in place. Such texts restore an imaginary fullness or plenitude to set against the broken rubric of our past (Hall 1996, 112).

The “Triangle” Hall speaks of is that triangular trade of laborers – enslaved and free, ideas, and capital that linked Africa, the New World, and Europe. Although Africa rests at the center of the Triangle, it remains silenced and forgotten in relation to the European and American *Présences*. But although the status of Africa has been submerged and subjugated in the minds and hearts of Caribbean people, Stuart Hall offers us a way out of this repression; by tracing those transnational routes and re-membering Africa, centering its presence and legacy in the Triangle, the “loss of identity” can be repaired and overcome.

David Scott reminds us that “in its social and ideological aspects, the ‘Negro Question’ in the pre-First World War years of [the twentieth] century had to do with whether the Negro could be considered a candidate for full social and moral citizenship in the American body-politic” (Scott 1991, 6). Questions about the assimilability of “the Negro” spoke directly to fears and concerns that Black people were intrinsically unfit to enjoy the rights and privileges of first-class, American citizenship. Pre-eminent anthropologist Franz Boas “responded to the contemporary racist image of Black culture by attempting to place it in a certain proximity to an anthropologically rehabilitated representation of its African past” (ibid 7). Boas chose to emphasize Africa as an alternative to placing enslavement at the center of Black culture. One such example emphasizing the culture of enslavement over cultural transmission from Africa was Charles S. Johnson’s rural ethnography “Shadow of the Plantation” (1934). Published at the height of the Great Depression, the African American Sociologist describes family

life in Macon County, Alabama as disorganized according to mainstream, middle-class, American ideals. Perhaps unwittingly, Johnson illustrates the ways in which economic imperative was key to social and family cohesion. Because almost every aspect of plantation life at this time was driven by the Jim Crow political economy, sex and violence tended to take on largely symbolic roles as expressive and recreational outlets. It seems the major contribution given by Johnson's work is to illustrate the ways in which the total institution of plantation slavery had really changed very little since the end of Reconstruction.

Zora Neale Hurston, a student of Franz Boas, saw Black Americans as a "positive anthropological problem," to be studied on their own terms as opposed to a social problem to be solved. Indeed,

Black southern life as recorded in Hurston's work was characterized by more than unrelenting work, violence, and imprisonment. While it was a place where bondage and racial domination persisted after the Civil war, the South, for her and her subjects, was also a place of cultural creativity, family, and religion, where everyday life was lived with integrity in the midst of struggle against racial oppression (Patterson 2005: 9).

In her creative writing as well as her nonfiction, Hurston depicted Black Southerners as an intensely spiritual people who, of course, have inherited cultural, cosmological, religious and philosophical traits from Africa (1931; 1981; 2009 [1935]). She does not simply offer a picture of Black people as ecstatically waiting to worship the coming Messiah, Hurston tempers her ethnographies with explorations of Black humor, and storytelling; in so doing, Hurston sketches an early example of what some might call "cultural resistance," in which oppressed subjects are able to resist and subvert white supremacist violence, and economic deprivation, as well as messages of inferior intellect, beauty and morality. Hurston's scholarly inquiries into and artistic vision of Black culture in the U.S. South – and really throughout the country – are filled with the

acknowledgement of the plantations' long shadows, as well as of the dynamic vibrancy of African adaptations.

Hurston's colleague and contemporary, "a student of Franz Boas (and much influenced by him in this regard) Herskovits, perhaps more than anyone, helped to establish the 'New World Negro' as a positive anthropological problem, that is to say, as a visible and distinctive problem of 'history' and 'culture'" (Scott 1991: 6). Writing during a time of fierce anti-Black racism and violence Herskovits sought to document a recoverable past for "New World Negroes" (1990 [1941]). In the *Myth of the Negro Past* (1990 [1941]) Herskovits introduces the terms "survival" and "retention," words that imply the subconscious transmission of cultural traits over time. It seems as though, following Herskovits' understanding, an Africanism is a tradition-bearing cultural unit, trait or entity that can be passed along and quantifiably measured. Surveying the Western Hemisphere for African survivals and retentions, Herskovits argues that because of the racially homogenous plantation societies of the Caribbean – and the relative geographic isolation of many Black communities in Latin America – there were many more opportunities for culture to develop away from the coercive oversight of the powerful elites. In North America, however, because many Black people have historically lived in racially mixed communities with whites and Americans Indians, Herskovits asserts that Black North Americans were not able to "retain" anything of their autonomous traditions.

Herskovits' colleague and contemporary, Hortense Powdermaker, describes Indianola, Mississippi in 1939, as a place in which the legacy of enslavement is still very much alive. Uncertain about the prevalence of "Africanisms" in everyday life and culture, Powdermaker, does, on the other hand, see more than a few "survivals" passed

along by elder generations. For example, she writes of the matriarchal family structure among rural Mississippi Black folk as a kind of survival from the era of enslavement in which formal or informal family ties were susceptible to the whims of the marketplace and auction block. Because “blood” family was not necessarily a guaranteed or stable presence in any Black man’s, woman’s, or child’s life, Powdermaker observes these bonds as being easily transferrable to fictive kin: “the personnel of these matriarchal families is variable and even casual. Stepchildren, illegitimate children, adopted children, mingle with the children of the house. No matter how small or how crowded the home is, there is always room for a stray child, an elderly grandmother, an indigent aunt, a homeless friend” (Powdermaker 1939: 146). Perhaps an Africanism, e.g. “it takes a village to raise a child,” definitely a survival, Powdermaker’s observations echo Du Bois’ own (in Philadelphia at least), as well as contemporary E. Franklin Frazier’s (1932; 1939), and foreshadow conclusions drawn by ethnographer Carol Stack in her study of poor Black women living in a small Midwestern town, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (1974).

Published first in 1976, less than a decade after San Francisco State and Nathan Hare coordinated the first undergraduate Black Studies program, Mintz and Price set out to restore some of the agency lost to Black culture-bearing individuals under Herskovits’ regime in the 1940s and 1950s. Price’s and Mintz’s work, *The Birth of African American Culture*, challenges Herskovits’ passive notion of African cultural retentions; instead, Mintz and Price stress the immediate context of enslavement as being the single most important cultural referent. The authors argue “the Africans in any New World colony in fact became a *community* and began to share a *culture* only insofar as, they themselves

created them” (Mintz and Price 1976, 14). However, in seeking to radically challenge the anthropological discourse on survivals and retentions, slavery “comes to perform the same rhetorical-conceptual labor as Africa in the work of Herskovits. Both turn on a distinctive attempt to place the ‘cultures’ of the ex-African/ex-slave in relation to [...] an authentic past, that is, an anthropologically identifiable, ethnologically recoverable, [I would add, historically knowable,] and textually re-presentable past” (Scott 1991, 2).

The book puts forth an anti-essentialist agenda by rejecting “the encounter model” as being too simplistic; “usually, this model posits the existence of two ‘cultures,’ one African and one European, which are brought into contact in the New World by white colonists and Black slaves” (Mintz and Price 1976, 7). However, Mintz and Price point out that “the Africans who were brought to any specific New World colony could not be said to have had a single collective culture to transport” (ibid 8). On the other hand, *The Birth of African American Culture* explains Africa’s symbolic presence in the New World in terms of the original cultural and historical plenitude it represents. From the outset the authors juxtapose the relatively homogenous culture of the Europeans with the diverse cultural heritages from which the newly enslaved Africans had been transplanted (Mintz and Price 1976). Nonetheless, Mintz and Price put forth that “the beginnings of what would later develop into ‘African-American cultures’ must date from the very earliest interactions of the newly enslaved men and women on the African continent itself” (42).

The authors speculate that “most West and Central African religions were relatively permeable to foreign influences and tended to be ‘additive’ rather than ‘exclusive’ in their orientation toward other cultures” (45). This cultural openness or extraversion on the part of enslaved African individuals resulted in the creolization of

African-American cultures, from language and foodways to kinship and social structure. Mintz and Price point to new conceptualizations of kinship and family that were products of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and African enslavement. In Jamaica and in Suriname (among other New World colonies) the terms “shipmate,” and “sippi” were used “between people who had actually shared the experience of transport in a single vessel; later, it began to be used between slaves who belonged to a single plantation, preserving the essential notion of fellow sufferers” (1976, 43). The authors “believe that the development of these social bonds, even before the Africans had set foot in the New World, already announced the birth of new societies based on new kinds of principles” (ibid, 44).

Taking the “shipmate” phenomenon seriously, Paul Gilroy starts his analysis of modern transatlantic connections with ships at sea and their human and other cargo; he writes “it should be emphasized that ships were the living means by which the points within the Atlantic world were joined. They were mobile elements that stood for the “shifting spaces between the fixed places that they connected” (1993, 16). Gilroy highlights the African Diaspora as a space defined historically by the initial rupture of the transatlantic slave trade – and its ensuing period of racial terror. He defines the space as well as by the movement and flux that takes place within it. For that reason, Gilroy identifies the “rhizomorphic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation I call the Black Atlantic” (ibid 4). Gilroy argues against essentialist notions of ethnic absolutism that would populate the diasporic landscape and instead posits that it might be more useful to think of the story of diaspora as not about roots, but *routes*. Because primacy is placed upon the adventures at sea as they shape the modern Black experience,

Gilroy effectively tracks the movements of a certain bourgeois Black intellectual set – namely Alexander Crummell, Edward Blyden, Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. Du Bois and Richard Wright, thereby largely writing working class people and women out of the story. Gilroy sees diaspora space, the Black Atlantic, as defined by the embodied spatial practice of traveling across and through it.

Paul Gilroy builds upon Stuart Hall's Triangle as his point of departure for talking about the Black Atlantic. Gilroy also follows in the same general vein as Mintz and Price in maintaining the centrality of enslavement, and "racial terror" as the principal referents in Black (Atlantic) identity. The author maintains that "the question of racial terror always remains in view when these modernisms are discussed because imaginative proximity to terror is their inaugural experience" (Gilroy 1993, 73). Ultimately, Gilroy's project is to write Black people into the history of the West; if modernity is to be defined by rationality, Enlightenment thought and discussion of the inalienable rights of man, so too is the modern era characterized by the transatlantic slave trade, plantation slavery, and racial terror.

Acknowledging Herskovits' observation of racial proximity and honoring Hurston's documentation of syncretic spiritual beliefs and practices among African descendents in the U.S South and the Caribbean, Gilroy celebrates the hybridity and creolization inherent in Diaspora communities and identities. However, Gilroy distances himself from Herskovits' school of thought when he writes "the syncretic complexity of black expressive cultures alone supplies powerful reasons for resisting the idea that an untouched, pristine Africanity resides inside these forms, working a powerful magic of alterity in order to trigger repeatedly the perception of absolute identity" (ibid 101). But

in order for Gilroy to make his argument about how entangled Black people have been historically with the Europe and the West, he leaves African experiences unwritten, outside of the realm of history, outside the realm of Western spheres of influence.

The routes he tracks through the Black Atlantic are overwhelmingly one-way: from the Americas to Europe, from the Americas to Africa. Gilroy examines “the ambivalence over exile and homecoming” to Africa in Martin Delany’s “African tour” (ibid 24), and concludes that it (the tour) “confirmed the dissimilarities between African-American ideologues and the Africans with whom they treated. Thus it is not surprising that though at the end of his account of his adventures in Africa Delany promised to return to Africa with his family, he never did so” (ibid loc cit). While I’m relatively convinced by Gilroy’s spatial metaphor, it seems as though he relies heavily on the movements of Black New World, bourgeois male intellectuals and artists to make his case that Black Atlantic ground is profoundly fertile when it comes to working class movements for social justice. Although Gilroy does much to complicate the color line – insisting that ethnic or racial absolutisms (should) have no place in the Black Atlantic – there is very little theorization of the differences between Africans and their diasporic counterparts, or class and the fluidity of its experience for Black peoples, traveling the Atlantic world.

And just where are the voices of the women of the Black Atlantic? In the introduction Gilroy rips apart Patricia Hill Collins’ work *Black Feminist Thought* for being too essentialist; Gilroy, writing against any type of absolutism asks how can there be a Black woman’s standpoint from which to theorize the world? What he does not acknowledge is that Collins’ standpoint theory is a self-defined point of departure from

which to articulate her unique angle of vision as a Black woman and feminist.

Unfortunately, while Gilroy is careful to note which Black Atlantic forefathers were patriarchs or misogynists, nowhere in the text does Gilroy actually feature women's experiences as travelers, intellectuals, workers or artists.

Anthropologist J. Lorand Matory builds upon Gilroy's transatlantic routes by insisting that while homelands (read: 'African origins') create what Gilroy would call a truly Black Atlantic subject, so too do diasporas "create their homelands" (Matory 2005, 3). In fact, Matory identifies through the use of archival and ethnographic methods the "products of ongoing human agency in a circum-Atlantic field, the overall form of which I call the 'Afro-Atlantic dialogue'" (ibid 35). While Gilroy's project was to write Black people into the story of modernity, Matory's main focus is to write Black people into the story of transnationalism. He writes "commerce and migration across the Sahara, across the Indian Ocean, and across the diverse regions of sub-Saharan Africa are among the forces that have long made Africa a cosmopolitan and ever-changing place" (ibid 2).

Matory casts Black transnationalism as itself a "survival" with historical roots. Tracing "the activities of an itinerant, trans-Atlantic religious and commercial elite whose lifeways are no more reducible to the conditions of Brazilian enslavement and racial oppression than to some primordial African 'origins'" (ibid 7), Matory steers clear of the Herskovits/Mintz and Price debate as to whether enslavement or Africa is the more meaningful referent to Black identity. And while the struggle to attain full citizenship, economic access, and sovereignty may articulate with the Afro-Atlantic dialogue throughout the African Diaspora, Jacqueline Nassy Brown makes a critical intervention in shaping the discourse when she asks what is the story of power in diaspora. Brown's

intervention is important to bear in mind when positing an “Afro-Atlantic dialogue” because since “not everyone partakes in the privileges of membership to the diasporic community with impunity” (Brown 2005, 42) not everyone may feel their voices are heard loudly and/or clearly in the conversation.

Stuart Hall deals with Africa as the site of the repressed. Herskovits went looking for Africa as a way to raise the esteem of the Negro, while Mintz and Price described a creolization of cultures derived from the conditions of enslavement. Gilroy and Hurston both celebrate the creolized, hybrid nature of Black (transnational) modernity, and Matory stresses a more co-eval approach to listening for the Afro-Atlantic dialogue. But it seems that each person of African descent (Continental, New World, etc.) must reckon for themselves the meanings of the “*présence Africaine*.” Of course, this reckoning does not happen in a vacuum, and the meaning of Black identity must be weighed over and against the forces of white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy.

Globally, various European colonial arrangements have fed into a single stream, resulting in a racial hierarchy which continues to keep Black and dark-skinned groups on the bottom with the strategic use of physical, psychological and symbolic violence. And because of New Orleans’ adoption of a standard, anti-Black racial ideology, the majority of the city’s citizens are vulnerable to man-made and natural disasters like those seen during the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricane season. The assumption of an exceptional New Orleans makes possible and indeed perpetuates the myth of racial harmony, which has been sold to tourists and visitors alike for the last century by the city’s business elites. For this reason, it was all the more shocking to the rest of the nation to see the images of Black poverty unmasked by the Katrina disaster. But New Orleans in many ways is quite

“normal” when it comes to the Black urban experience in the U.S. Indeed, the story of New Orleans is a typical “ghetto” story.

Ghetto stories

The ghetto is a place that has been curiously under theorized in any qualitative way in social scientific literature that deals with Black subjects. However, there is a long history of scholarly inquiry into the ghetto. The first social scientific inquiry of the many that were to come was W.E.B Du Bois’ 1899 study of the *Philadelphia Negro*.

Introducing the most recent edition of Du Bois’ breakthrough work, literary scholar

Lawrence Bobo notes:

A signal feature of Du Bois’s approach was to highlight the internal heterogeneity and complexity of the Black population itself. He put forward what may be the first effort to describe a class structure within the Black community. He even identified a sort of “submerged tenth” that has similarities to more contemporary discussions of an “urban underclass” or new ghetto poverty (2007, xxvii).

Indeed, Du Bois was the first African American scholar to zero in on the role of class in the lives of urban Black people. Toward a theorization of class within the Black community, Du Bois writes, “in good times perhaps fifty per cent of the Negroes could well be designated comfortable, but in time of financial stress vast numbers of this class fall below the line into the poor and go to swell the number of paupers, and in many cases of criminals” (Du Bois 2007 [1899], 123). In this brief passage Du Bois makes clear the tenuousness and fluidity of class experience among Black folks; significantly, Du Bois also directly links crime and criminality to poverty. Du Bois later defines crime explicitly as “a phenomenon of organized social life, and...the open rebellion of an

individual against his social environment” (ibid 166). Placing the moral responsibility for crime squarely on the shoulders of society, Du Bois continues on to write:

In the case of the Negro there were special causes for the prevalence of crime: he had lately been freed from serfdom, he was the object of stinging oppression and ridicule, and paths of advancement open to many were closed to him. Consequently the class of shiftless, aimless, idle, discouraged and disappointed was proportionally larger (ibid 169).

Pointing to the social causes underlying the perpetration of Black crime, Du Bois thereby writes against an interpretation of criminality as something inherently biological, or imbedded within a pathological (Black) psyche. Du Bois does, however, tether the notions of crime and criminality to the Black urban experience, helping to make the ghetto a symbol of lawlessness, on the fringe of mainstream society and out of the reach of law enforcement.

Symptomatic of the impoverished “slum,” Du Bois observes “an unusual excess of females” (ibid 34) in the cities with the largest “Colored” populations. “The cause of this excess is easy to explain” he writes: “From the beginning the industrial opportunities of Negro women in cities have been far greater than those of men, through their large employment in domestic service...the proportion, therefore, of men to women is a rough index of the industrial opportunities of the Negro” (ibid 35). But there are other factors that might also explain the “unusual excess of females;” for instance, the total population count of the seventh ward “does not include residents of the ward then in prisons or almshouses. There were a considerable number of omissions among loafers and criminals without homes, the class of lodgers and the club-house habitués” (ibid 41). Most of those omitted, then, were Black men (as is presently the case with census data which does not also measure the mass incarceration of Black men, women and children) whose absence strongly contributed to the imbalanced sex ratios of the Black ghetto. At

the very outset of *The Philadelphia Negro*, Du Bois determines distinct gendered dimensions to the ghetto caused by the imperatives of the political economy.

Almost fifty years after Du Bois' groundbreaking work, social scientists St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton authored *Black Metropolis: A study of Negro life in a Northern city* (1945). In the authors' commentary they write "the studies began as investigations of the general social conditions surrounding the problem of juvenile delinquency on Chicago's 'South Side'" (xiii). Like its predecessor, *The Philadelphia Negro*, *Black Metropolis* pays close attention to class, crime, and gender in urban "Negro life." Similar to Du Bois' gendered findings in Philadelphia, Drake and Cayton observe that in Chicago's Black Belt "the restricted economic base of the community was [...] evident in the high proportion of women doing domestic service" (Drake and Cayton 1993 [1945] 203- 204).

Updating Du Bois' turn-of-the-century text, Drake and Cayton chronicle Black migratory patterns in the early twentieth century. Between 1917 and 1921 Black people moving into Chicago neighborhoods were met with bombs as white homeowners felt threatened by the Great Migration's "Negro peril" (ibid 175), as WWI had largely forestalled the construction of new housing units. But "by 1925, the wave of bombings had ceased. Since that time the major device for controlling the expansion of the Negro community has been the restrictive covenant – an agreement between property owners within a district not to rent or sell to Negroes" (ibid 179). Drake and Cayton highlight the centrality of the restrictive covenant to the maintenance and perpetuation of the South Side's coerced social "isolation." In this way, the restrictive covenant simply corroborates the existence of "antagonism [...] toward the 40,000 Negroes who migrated

to Black Metropolis during the Depression. There was a tendency during this period to feel that Midwest Metropolis had no responsibilities toward an unwanted population which was crowding into the already saturated Black Belt” (ibid 207). As a result, “ghetto conditions” worsened and Black Metropolis suffered “high sickness and death rates; a heavy relief load during the Depression; inadequate recreational facilities; lack of building repairs; neglect of garbage disposal and street cleaning; overcrowded schools; high rates of crime and juvenile delinquency; and rough treatment by the police” (ibid 202). These attitudes would continue throughout the twentieth century, and Drake and Cayton’s findings would corroborate the complementarity of physical and structural violence in keeping the ghetto intact.

Perhaps *the* definitive social science text pertaining to the problems of the ghetto and of the urban poor in the late-twentieth century U.S. is William Julius Wilson’s book *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987), which, in his words,

challenges liberal orthodoxy in analyzing inner-city problems; discusses in candid terms the social pathologies of the inner city; establishes a case for moving beyond race-specific policies to ameliorate inner-city social conditions to policies that address the broader problems of societal organization, including economic organization; and advances a social democratic public-policy agenda designed to improve the life chances of truly disadvantaged groups such as the ghetto underclass by emphasizing programs to which the more advantaged groups of all races can positively relate (viii).

Like its social scientific predecessors, and most especially *Black Metropolis*, the impetus for inquiry into “Negro life” (Drake and Cayton 1945) or what Wilson refers to above as “the ghetto underclass” was the author’s “travels to inner-city neighborhoods in the city of Chicago in the past several years and by my perception of social changes, including changes in the class structure, in inner-city neighborhoods” (Wilson 1987, viii).

Although *Philadelphia Negro* and *Black Metropolis* contain pointed critiques of the social and economic power of white upper-classes in the blossoming of Black ghettos,

The Truly Disadvantaged is a book which is heavily indebted to the Chicago school notions of race, culture, and assimilation. As such, Wilson owes much to the race-thinking of Robert Park and E. Franklin Frazier who both emphasize the primacy of class while evacuating any authentic cultural dimension to Black racial identity. Rather, “Park believed that those Negroes who could and would assimilate had a legitimate claim to American culture, but those who suffered the full brunt of discrimination and structural inequality were simply mired in bad behavior and shackled by the legacy of slavery” (Baker 2010: 26). Frazier also contributes to this line of race-thinking when he writes “the Negro has not introduced new patterns of behavior, but has failed to conform to patterns about him. The degree of conformity is determined by educational and economic factors as well as by social isolation” (cited in Baker 2010: 27).

Sociologist Kenneth B. Clark’s 1965 study of Harlem, *Dark Ghetto: dilemmas in social power*, also squarely aligns himself with the influential proponents of uplift. In his study published the same year as the infamous Moynihan Report, Clark identifies “the symptoms of lower-class society [that] affect the dark ghettos of America” as being “low aspirations, poor education, family instability, illegitimacy, unemployment, crime, drug addiction, and alcoholism, frequent illness and early death” (27), almost each of which is classified as a pathological deviance from the national norm. Likewise – and more contemporarily, Wilson spends much time parsing “the tangle of pathology in the inner city” (1987: 21), whose sociological factors include crime, chronic under/un-employment, welfare dependency, and impoverished female-headed households.

Indeed, part of the controversy over *The Truly Disadvantaged* – which is the same controversy that the proponents of uplift (Park, Frazier, Moynihan, Clark) had to confront

– stems from its use of the concept of pathology as explanatory of ghetto residents’ behavior; Wilson seemingly periodizes his analysis of “a new dimension to the urban crisis” (3), taking his cue from Clark’s “cry of the ghetto” (1965: 1) by saying “inner-city communities prior to 1960 exhibited the features of social organization – including a sense of community, positive neighborhood identification, and explicit norms and sanctions against aberrant behavior” (Wilson 1987: 3). Wilson presents the reader with the structural dynamics of urban ghettos of the ‘60s and ‘70s up to the present day which stand in stark contrast to the period of legible, socially “organized” communities; “the key theoretical concept, therefore, is not *culture of poverty* [an explanatory analytic sanctioned by American anthropologist Oscar Lewis, and subsequently endorsed in Moynihan’s report] but *social isolation*” (ibid 61).

Wilson’s theory of social isolation – which is really Frazier’s theory of social isolation reintroduced decades later – “not only implies that contact between groups of different class and/or racial backgrounds is either lacking or has become increasingly intermittent but that the nature of this contact enhances the effects of living in a highly concentrated poverty area” (ibid loc cit). For Wilson, growing social isolation between groups is the culprit behind the recent deterioration of ghetto conditions. He concludes questioningly that while “racial discrimination is the most frequently invoked explanation [...] is discrimination really greater today than it was in 1948, when black unemployment was less than half of what it is now, and when the gap between black and white jobless rates was narrower?” (ibid 140). Wilson’s de-centering of race as a salient category of analysis is the crux of why his is seen as a very controversial intervention in the social

science debates around the so-called ghetto underclass. Writing against race in his public policy recommendations, Wilson reminds us that

Those who cite discrimination as the root cause of poverty often fail to make a distinction between the effects of *historic* discrimination (i.e., discrimination prior to the mid-twentieth century) and the effects of *contemporary* discrimination. Thus they find it hard to explain why the economic position of the black underclass started to worsen soon after Congress enacted, and the White House began to enforce, the most sweeping civil rights legislation since Reconstruction (Wilson 1987: 141).

Here is where he departs from the evidence suggested in *Philadelphia Negro*, *Black Metropolis*, and even in *Dark Ghetto*; in the above passage Wilson sounds like a liberal proponent of civil rights, heralding the success of integration and highlighting “the declining significance of race” (Wilson 1980) in the lived experience of the ghetto underclass. However, because Wilson does not make any room in his argument for the persistence and intentionality of contemporary discrimination his argument falls short.

In New Orleans, for example, many poor people – and most especially Black folks – have been concentrated in geographically low-lying areas “back-of-town” and in the places that had formerly been havens for maroonage behind the sugar and cotton plantations of wealthy white owners; neighborhoods like today’s lower 9th ward among others were home to maroons of many colors. Geographers Jeff Ueland and Barney Warf (2006) note that in the

specific context of southern cities, in which residential housing, labor markets, and institutionalized racism conspired to relegate African Americans to the most low-lying, flood-prone, and amenity poor regions...the altitudinal distribution of risk is mirrored in the distribution of environmental amenities such as views and access to clean air. Environmental vulnerability is thus an outcome and proxy for the racialized economic dynamics of the housing market (Ueland and Warf 2006: 50).

While certainly, the patterns of residential and racial distributions are historic in their origins, the persistence of contemporary discrimination ensures that people living in “amenity poor” regions of the city will stay exactly where they are.

Another potential answer to Wilson's question posed above might be found in examining the rise of the prison-industrial complex and the war on drugs. Shortly after Congress enacted "sweeping" civil rights legislation, a new regime of social control evolved, owing its basic elemental structure to the enduring legacy of Jim Crow. Legal scholar Michelle Alexander documents "the New Jim Crow" (2010) and illustrates how the criminal injustice system at every stage from enforcement to sentencing targets, polices, and subjects to unwarranted surveillance poor Black (and Latino) men – and increasingly women, warehousing them in jails and prisons, and then legally stripping them of their hard won civil rights upon release.

Positing a theoretical social isolation amongst the urban (Black) poor, it seems as though Wilson believes white flight to be the major cause of worsening ghetto conditions. And what of gentrification? Doesn't that effectively solve the problem of "social isolation" for ghetto residents witnessing the gentrification of their neighborhoods? Of course, New Orleans has seen its urban morphology shift due to these phenomena. For example, geographer Pierce Lewis writes:

Beginning in 1960, white flight shifted into high gear. White population plummeted, at the same time that Black population continued to increase. By about 1974, for the first time since 1830, the number of blacks in New Orleans exceeded that of whites. By 2000, blacks outnumbered whites by a ratio of well over 2 to 1. Throughout this period, the rate of white flight was such that the city's white population dropped from about 400,000 to fewer than 140,000...New Orleans had been converted from a white city with black enclaves to a black city with white enclaves (Lewis 2003: 177).

While white flight changed the city as a whole, gentrification led by young, white "urban pioneers" changed the contours of specific neighborhoods. Munski and O'Loughlin (1979) writing in the late 1970s show that at least in the neighborhoods of Lower Marigny (a neighborhood adjacent to the bywater district in the upper 9th ward) and Algiers (on the Westbank of the Mississippi River) the process of gentrification and

housing rehabilitation was well under way by white middle class householders. They identify the neighborhoods' "discoveries" in 1970 (Lower Marigny) and 1972 for Algiers.

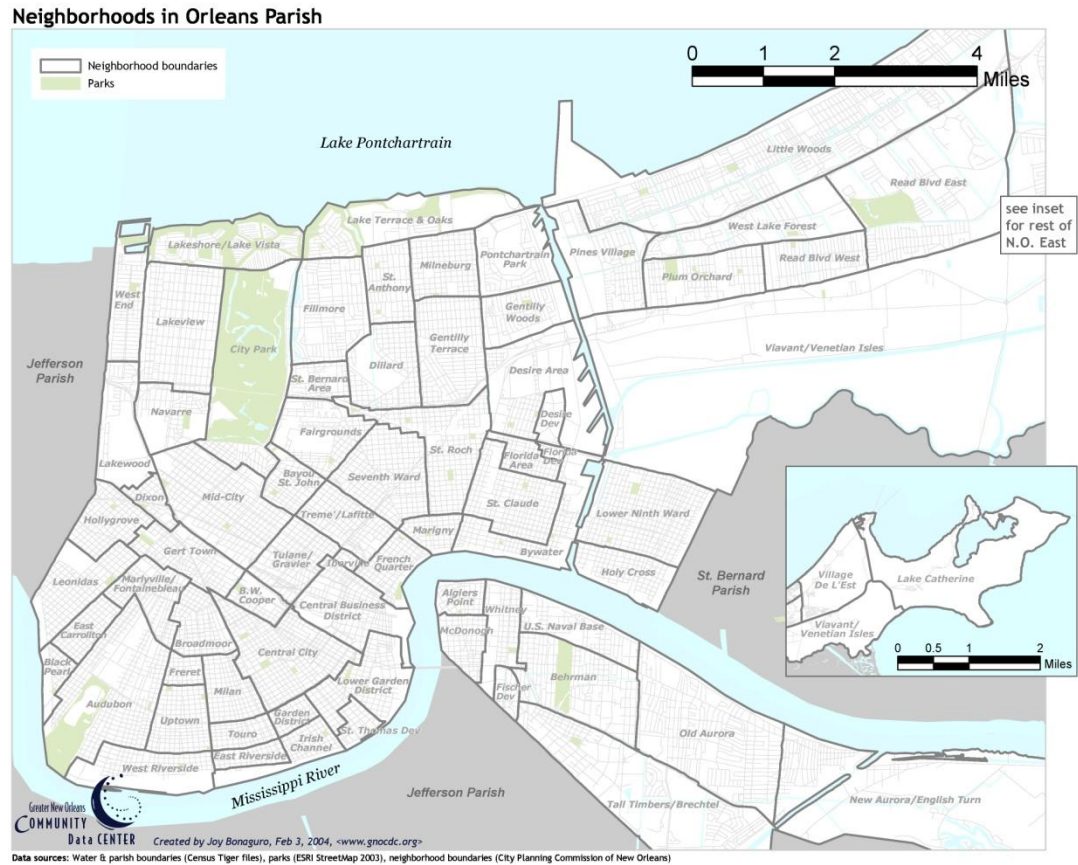


Figure 2: New Orleans Neighborhoods

The authors administer a street survey in 1976 which finds that 44% of the housing stock in lower marigny is already renovated. The sales transactions indicate that most homes are bought in majority-Black areas of the neighborhood; the spatial pattern of gentrification in this instance is found to resemble contagion, which is similar to cases of abandonment and blight, and is said to principally displace Black and elderly renters. In many ways the changes shaping the city of New Orleans were remaking the city into something tragically unremarkable.

Cultural analyses and sociological theories of gentrification attempt to tease out the complexities among the perceived, conceived, and lived aspects of space. This set of entwined interactions is a “calculus of forced relationships” (De Certeau 1984: xix) to which urban ethnographers are especially attuned. Cameron and Coaffee (2005) see gentrification as a three-stage process made visible by the appearance of the arts: In the first stage, the neighborhood is transformed into a milieu for artistic and cultural production; in the second stage, the neighborhood becomes commodified as a space for private consumption of cultural products; and finally, in the third stage of gentrification public policy emphasizes the link between artistic and cultural production and urban regeneration through the encouragement of public consumption of art and culture via public events and revitalized physical infrastructure for monuments, landmarks, and tourist attractions. Following Cameron’s and Coaffee’s three stage processual model of art-induced gentrification, New Orleans has undergone a near total transformation in only three years, with the city hosting its first-ever (and the largest U.S. based) art biennial in the fall of 2008.

David Ley and Richard Florida point to the “new” cultural and middle classes whose aesthetic (re)valuations underwrite the beginning stages of gentrification in formerly blighted neighborhoods (Ley 1997; Florida 2004). While Florida anticipates the rise of the creative class will lead to economic growth and transform urban, “street level culture” (2004: 166). Ley, on the other hand, theorizes that while artists (and other professionals who comprise the “new cultural class”) may be the harbingers of gentrification, because of their high cultural capital and relatively low economic capital, artists are soon displaced by gentrifiers whose income and/or wealth provide them with

access to ample amounts of economic/financial capital and relatively low cultural capital

(Ley 1997; 2003). Florida eventually concurs with Ley's thesis when he writes

On close inspection, talent clustering provides little in the way of trickle-down benefits. Its benefits flow disproportionately to more highly-skilled knowledge, professional and creative workers whose higher wages and salaries are more than sufficient to cover more expensive housing in these locations. While less-skilled service and blue-collar workers also earn more money in knowledge-based metros, those gains disappear once their higher housing costs are taken into account (Florida 2013).

In her essay, "Between HOPE and Home: the Fight for Public Housing and the Right of Return in New Orleans" (2007), Luft makes clear that the federal housing initiative known as HOPE VI has foreshadowed the destructive power of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita to disperse poor people from their homes and communities. She notes that before the hurricane season of 2005, many public housing projects had been demolished under the auspices of this program, the replacement being "mixed-use" development. Since 2005, Luft writes

the rapid decision to close four projects in New Orleans trumped the federal approval process required for HOPE VI projects...The decision is an accelerated – and according to the lawsuit, illegal – attempt to remake public housing in one city in the public eye, and to thwart almost three quarters of a century of housing and civil rights legislation (4).

It seems absurd to say that the mere presence of middle class residents is enough to prevent the deterioration of inner-city neighborhoods. By assuming that the middle classes would act as role models to their poorer neighbors, Wilson effectively renders the ghetto underclass as passive subjects who, because they fail to mimic mainstream definitions of moral behavior and good work ethic, are doomed to suffer their poverty alone while the rest of the country passes them by. He evacuates from the racialized landscape any discussion of violence and racial terror – which Gilroy sees as essential to the construction of Black identity. And, in short, Wilson writes the "socially isolated"

underclass out of the Afro-Atlantic dialogue. But how would Wilson explain Du Bois' observations of ghetto conditions among Philadelphia's class-integrated seventh ward?

And, to bring the conversation to bear on more recent headlines and controversies, why doesn't Wilson discuss the contemporary role of preferential lending, or restrictive covenants? In the white, working-class suburb of Chalmette, which abuts the Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans, the city council enacted restrictive covenants based on "blood," preventing white landlords from leasing, renting, or selling to any non-blood-related family members as a way to stem the tide of displaced, Black New Orleanians seeking the right of return after Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. Indeed, in the New Orleans context, especially post-Katrina, blood and water are "ambiguous things subject to racial regulation" (Germany 2007: 4).

In the case of New Orleans, as in so many other cases nation-wide, theories which disregard the racialized outcomes of local, state and national economic, and real estate development policies tend not to explain much about the formation, conditions, or changing dynamics of the Black ghetto. Studies like those cited above, which address historic residential patterns, political and economic interventions into local and national housing policy and urban gentrification are much more useful in defining as well as understanding the Black ghetto.

Across the disciplines, the city is seen as at very least able to provide symptomatic readings of the complex interactions between and amongst local, regional, national, and global forces. Theories of urbanization and city life often describe it as being the locus of modernity; alternately, the city is seen as being home to great social contradictions (Appadurai 1996; Castells 1983; Mullings 1987; Smith 1996; Schneider

and Susser 2003). The city of New Orleans in particular has been described as the “Creole capital,” and the “soul of America” (Hall 1992; Hirsch and Logsdon 1992). It has been suggested that the key to understanding racial practices in the U.S. South lies in examining the history of urban race relations in New Orleans (Somers 1974). In many respects, New Orleans is understood as an exceptional U.S. world city *because* of its unique racial and cultural make-up. However, even the so-called “Creole capital” is not safe from gentrification. Rather, New Orleans has suffered from deindustrialization, privatization, and the over-reliance on the expansion of urban real-estate markets like many cities in the U.S. have since the late 1970s (Smith 2002). In any case, understanding what’s going on in New Orleans is absolutely imperative because in the words of Larry Davis, director of the University of Pittsburgh’s Center on Race and Social Problems: “This may be the first American city built in the 21st century [...] New Orleans has the opportunity to be a model for the country... Here’s our chance” (El Nasser 2005).

Un-natural disasters

Disaster literature is a growing body of scholarship that has interrogated the social causes for so-called “natural” disasters. In post-Katrina New Orleans, scholars, engineers, and pundits all seem to agree that what was most disastrous about Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was the utter failure of those in charge to adequately prepare for or to cope with the aftermath. The premise that disaster is an essentially social phenomenon – both as an event and a process – underwrites the recent scholarship about calamity and its contexts and consequences (Diamond 2005; Fortun 2001; Greenhouse 2002; Hoffman

2002; Oliver-Smith 1996; Klein 2007; Smith 2006; De Waal 2006; Wisner 2003).

Behavioral response approaches to the study of disasters aim to identify the dynamics by which “new hierarch[ies] and allocation[s] of responsibility” come to replace the initial “egalitarianism of bewilderment” (De Waal 2006: 3). The authors featured in the edited volume *Ethnography in Unstable Places* interpret crisis to be a moment when “large-scale ‘systems’ are suddenly revealed to be fragile amalgams of improvisatory arenas” (Greenhouse 2002: 24); yet, however “improvised” these “fragile amalgams,” power dynamics and the inequities they produce are startlingly resilient in the face of catastrophic change.

Writing specifically about the social impacts of the 2005 hurricane season on New Orleans and the nation, Neil Smith and Alex de Waal (Understanding Katrina 2006) both cynically conclude that reconstruction after major catastrophes tend to lock-in the very inequalities that made such social disasters possible in the first place. Smith argues that these inequalities are easily indexed by tracking the amount, scale, and geography of capital investment. De Waal, on the other hand, somewhat optimistically concludes his essay by asking whether the incompetence and neglect of the Bush administration might lead people to take on more overtly political stances to issues of both domestic and foreign policy.

Naomi Klein (2007) notes that reconstruction efforts have solidified old class hierarchies, and place the burden (“responsibility”) of recovery on ordinary citizens. Whereas the authors featured in the edited volume *Ethnography in Unstable Places* interpret crisis to be a moment when “large-scale ‘systems’ are suddenly revealed to be fragile amalgams of improvisatory arenas” (Greenhouse 2002: 24), others sees these

“fragile amalgams” as purposefully and deliberately neglected in order to turn a profit (Klein 2007; Smith 2006; Waters 2007). Naomi Klein cites the sudden proliferation of charter schools in post-Katrina New Orleans as an example of a commitment to market-driven solutions to social and political problems. Her concept of the “shock doctrine” contends that disasters open up opportunities for predatory neoliberal interests to reshape social relations in ways favorable to the perpetuation of capitalist growth and expansion. Cedric Johnson and the contributors to his volume *The neoliberal deluge: Hurricane Katrina, late capitalism, and the remaking of New Orleans* (2011), understand the neoliberal regime ushered in by the Reagan Administration to have paved the way for the decay and collapse of robust social services, which may have mitigated the catastrophic consequences of the Katrina disaster.

Jones-DeWeever and Hartmann (Hartman 2006) bring our attention to the gendered dimension of the economic climate in New Orleans prior to Katrina. The authors contend that as a demographic, women were the poorest most underserved social group in the Gulf Coast before the storm. They tie the vulnerability of New Orleans’ women to the feminization of poverty, stating that women make up 60% of the nation’s minimum-wage earners. In New Orleans specifically, fully 25% of women lived below the poverty line, and nearly 25% of elderly women shared the same condition before Katrina. By looking at earnings and divisions of labor the authors illustrate the life-threatening intersectionality of oppressions under which poor Black women struggle. Elaine Enarson (2012) details the divergent ways in which the Katrina disaster affected women who tend to act as caregivers for children, the infirm, and the elderly. It is no wonder that Black women, particularly single mothers and the elderly, were

disproportionately left to fend for themselves as Katrina made landfall. DeWeever has noted that since the storm more men than women have returned to the city for lack of adequate housing, schools, jobs, and childcare.

Many authors point to the political climate which has yielded over time to the whims of the so-called “free” market. George Lipsitz (2006) and Stephen Graham (2006) assert that the political and pop cultural backlash against the gains made by the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s informed the mismanagement of the Katrina disaster. For example, Stephen Graham (2006) also illustrates how the Federal war on crime and the war on drugs in particular ended up producing a war on cities across the nation. He indicts the protection of the ex-urban American lifestyle and its voracious consumption of energy (for which he argues the Iraq war was waged) as well as its furious denial of global warming and climate change, as the reason for which U.S. government priorities were in Iraq instead of New Orleans at the time of the storm. On the other hand, D. Strolovitch, D. Warren, and P. Frymer (2006) see anti-federalist backlash as at the root of weakening governmental capacities. Strolovitch, Warren, and Frymer assert that debates about federalism and states’ rights tend to act as smokescreens for powerful elites to discriminate against and do violence to Black people and other subversives, and “undesirables.” Of course, a major consequence of the anti-federalist backlash or the assertion of states’ rights was the so-called confusion over government responsibility and jurisdiction in the wake of the 2005 hurricane season.

For example, Michael Eric Dyson (2006) writes about the complicated geography of political jurisdiction as a result of Katrina’s aftermath. He observes that there were several commissions all furiously drawing up “master plans” for the rebuilding of the

city: the Louisiana Recovery Authority, created by the Governor and has consulted with the most prominent proponents of New Urbanism; the New Orleans City Council's own rebuilding plans; and finally the Mayor's Bring Back New Orleans Committee in conjunction with the Urban Land Institute, an organization charged with protecting the interests of real estate developers and land speculators. Mayor Nagin's committee was arguably the most wed to the notion of restoring the status quo, as it was forced by public outcry to abandon the rhetoric of, and planning models that would, "shrink the footprint" of the city by leaving low-lying areas undeveloped and concentrating rebuilding efforts and resources on the higher-ground, higher-income neighborhoods of the city. This plan saw the revenue-raising activities of the casinos as the only economically viable way forward after the storm.

Michael Casserly (Hartman 2006) offers yet another example of the multiple jurisdictions at work in New Orleans, when he writes about the city's fractured public school system. The largest charter school system in the U.S. has developed in New Orleans, as parents, teachers, and community activists have come to see these as providing at least a small measure of self-determination in terms of curriculum development, cultural conceptions of success and achievement. On the other hand, the State of Louisiana has seized control over the majority of New Orleans' "failing" public schools under the guise of the Recovery School District.⁴ With these new lines drawn, that leaves 18 schools still under the jurisdiction of the New Orleans School Board with at least 3 or 4 of those charter schools and the rest performing at a high enough level that the LA department of education is willing to leave them alone (for now). This does not

⁴It should be noted that the RSD was implemented thanks to legislation passed in 2003.

include the private schools in Orleans parish which are not beholden to any of these district authorities. Because the storm surge devastated the availability of jobs and housing, many students and teachers/school staff have left the NOPS never to return. To fill the void created when the teachers' union employing a majority of Black women, the largest union in LA, was dissolved, various efforts like AmeriCorps, TFA and TeachNOLA have been intensified (or established respectively) in order to attract outsiders – mostly young and idealistic, with very little classroom experience – into the school system.

The political climate of hostility towards the gains of the Civil Rights era precipitated the chaos created by overlapping jurisdictions; and because of this new era of conservatism – in which states rights rhetoric is again proclaimed – Lipsitz argues, a new social warrant of “competitive consumer citizenship” emerged in which each individual was forced to fend for herself. It was this “organized abandonment of poor and working class Black people in New Orleans prior to the hurricane” (2006: 24) that produced the conditions of possibility for the disaster that was to unfold after Katrina and Rita breached the levies and flooded the city.

In a working paper drawn up by the Peoples' Hurricane Relief Fund and Oversight Coalition (PHRF) Founding Member, Leon Waters, writes that in the wake of the 2005 levee failures the “number one political concern of the ruling bourgeois class and its state” was to preclude an insurrection or “spontaneous revolt” of the “oppressed classes of the African American nation. Quick, decisive, and repressive force must be instituted to prevent a revolt from rising” (2007: 1). Rather than interpreting the disaster response through the lens of paralysis or chaos, Waters would assert – and later the PHRF

tribunal would find – that the local and state response was deliberate and intentional. Indeed, the ruling powers’ political objective was to crush any insurrectionary or spontaneous revolt quickly. Their strategy was “to remove the African American citizenry and occupy the city” (ibid loc.cit). Their tactics included issuing shoot-to-kill orders and proclaiming martial law; “block[ing] African Americans from leaving the metro area on their own with the barrel of the gun⁵” (ibid 2), and prohibiting the right to free movement; as well as forced removal under the guise of “rescue.” Waters reminds us that “you *return* people when you rescue” (ibid loc.cit), and instead hundreds of thousands of African Americans were delivered to the Superdome or the Morial Convention Center. After days without food and water, African American so-called “refugees” were allowed to board after “whites were beckoned to board buses first” (ibid loc.cit); of course many of those who boarded the buses were given one-way tickets out of town.

Illustrating the cruel and militaristic character of disaster response, Waters – himself a “native son” of New Orleans – writes about his own terrifying experience being forcibly removed from his family home near the Uptown, Tulane University neighborhood:

My disabled father, Duncan A. Waters, an 86 year old retired educator and former District Superintendent of New Orleans Public Schools, and I were forced out of my home by eight to ten ATF white soldiers with machine guns. They refused to believe that two Black people resided in a predominantly white neighborhood. They put their guns to our heads and ordered us out or accept the consequences (ibid loc.cit)

In stark contrast to the treatment received by the Waters’ in their Uptown home,

⁵ Gretna Police barricaded the Crescent City Connection, the bridge which connects the east and west banks of the Mississippi River. Heavily armed and willing to use deadly force, the Gretna Police refused safe passage to the hundreds and thousands of New Orleanians trapped in low-lying areas as they attempted to flee to higher ground on the Westbank.

the state's treatment of Anglo-American working and middle class neighborhoods was respectable and dignified. Even with the vast destruction of St. Bernard Parish [in which Chalmette is located], a predominantly white, working-class area, the state ensured the privileged position of the Anglo-Americans; while the state's treatment of African Americans was always armed -- the African American masses faced 9mm, shotguns, and machine guns (3).

Sarah Kaufman (2006) writes about the criminalization of New Orleanians in the wake of Katrina and asks why, with all the humanitarian need in the city was the first established institution a make-shift jail? She suggests that the media focused on unconfirmed stories of "looting," violence, and mayhem because of the long history of moralizing the condition of poverty and then criminalizing poor people. The Fall 2008 issue of *National Women's Studies Association Journal* is organized around an in-depth, ethnographic exploration of the significance of gender on the impact of/recovery from hurricane Katrina. The editors of this special edition write that in the aftermath of the Katrina disaster, pundits, academics, and activists were quick to point to the combined effects of race and class, but were surprisingly silent on the question of gender, even as "old, infirm, heavily pregnant or paralyzed women were presented as the most pitiful victims of the disaster" (2008; viii). The editors spell out the ways in which white male (militarized) heroism was celebrated, while Black men were either "refeminized" as helpless and unable to save "their own" women, or "remasculinized" as lawless criminals and savages (ibid ix).

Havidán Rodríguez and Russell Dynes (2006) also draw stark contrasts between the reality of the Katrina disaster and its media framing and commentary. Rodríguez and Dynes reveal the unsubstantiated rumors and the hysterical, inaccurate assumptions about: 1) the number of dead bodies in the Superdome and the convention center; 2) widespread looting; and, 3) the escalation of violent crime, namely murder and rape, that characterized the Katrina Diaspora. Carol Stabile writes that news media had the choice

between two stories; she writes “the social drama that followed Hurricane Katrina (one that directly involved a conflict between a disaster story entailing the victimization of African Americans and a crime story centering on white fear of Black criminals) was played out publicly, on television screens throughout the United States” (2007: 690).

Stabile makes clear that the media response to Katrina in which Black survivors of the storm were portrayed as animals and lawless criminals was not limited to the “right wing” media outlets or programs; indeed, this “frame” was just as visible on CNN as it was on FOX. She argues that this “frame” was necessary for the national audience to overlook the racist, and criminal negligence of the federal government, i.e. those Black people deserved to suffer because they were/are criminals who refused to heed the warnings of the mandatory evacuation called by Nagin one day before Katrina’s landfall. She cogently argues that the militarized response to the Katrina disaster succeeded in policing and criminalizing the survival behavior of Black folks fleeing the storm.

INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence ask of the media’s obsession with crime reporting: “in the context of the egregiously racist and classist criminalization of these survivors of the storm, we must ask ourselves, why focus on sexual assault now?” (2007: 33). In taking the stories of rape and sexual violence seriously, INCITE! Women find that these violations were perpetrated by “community members” as well as “officials of the state,” they write: “the bottom line that this catastrophe painfully demonstrates is, yet again, how women and girls of color are at the intersection of violence perpetrated upon marginalized communities, both by external social forces and by those within our communities” (ibid 34).

A.C. Thompson, reporter for *The Nation* follows up on the allegations made in Spike Lee's *When the Levees Broke* wherein Black male survivors talk about the violence they faced at the hands of white residents intent on shooting "looters" (Lee 2005; Thompson 2008). In Thompson's article, he shows that the state and local law enforcement agencies were unwilling to punish the crimes of racist white vigilantes. Obviously, this poses a challenge for re-populating the city after Katrina if Black people do not feel safe, or welcome, in returning home. It is only thanks to the tireless activism and advocacy of Black New Orleanians that so many officers have been indicted and sentenced in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Long-time community organizers have forged city-wide alliances with a diverse coalition of New Orleanians young and old, working and middle class, Black, white, Vietnamese and Latino, citizens and undocumented.

The immediate strategy of militarized disaster response, and the criminalization and subsequent removal of Black residents throws into sharp relief the historical issues of migration and displacement that have proved foundational to Black identity. In terms of the racialized and gendered aspects of place-based belonging in New Orleans specifically, the editors of the Fall 2008 issue of the NWSA Journal also point to the ways in which writers of prose and poetry have painted New Orleans as a feminized city of mystery, transgression, and excess. Known for its quadroon balls and Mardi Gras, "New Orleans has long symbolized cultural hybridity, political resistance, sexual freedom, gender and racial fluidity – or the geographical embodiment of the intersection of gender, race, and class" (2008: x). Indeed, because NOLA's reputation precedes her, the editors warn us that "feminist scholars of place should not emulate mass media

pundits by permitting our analyses of historic New Orleans as a famous place, or of post-Katrina New Orleans as a newly infamous site of displacement, to fail to point out what gender has got to do with both” (ibid loc.cit).

Michael Eric Dyson (Dyson 2006; Troutt 2007) theorizes Black migration as historically falling somewhere between three poles: 1) submerged migrations, when folks are displaced because of changes in the job sector, or shutting down public housing; these migrations are submerged because they are not always visible in or remarked upon by the mainstream media; 2) subversive migrations, when folks leave a place by their own choice in order to escape violence/danger and to pursue freedom/a better life; and 3) subsidized migrations, when public policy or private enterprise creates incentives for people to move and opportunities once they get there. Dyson persuasively shows that aspects of all three types of migration are at work in the Katrina Diaspora. However, submerged and subversive migrations are much more relevant to the story of displaced New Orleanians as there was very little opportunity created by the government or private enterprise for poor and elderly people to escape the danger of the storm. And years later, with tens if not hundreds of thousands of people still displaced, there has been no incentive issued either for people to stay where they are or for people to return home.

Anthony Oliver-Smith (2006) writes that disaster can act as triggers or accelerators of social change that is imminent or already underway. He finds that migration is often a response to and survival strategy for so-called natural disasters, but that most “local displacement by disaster tends to be temporary, but may become permanent, particularly if the disaster permanently alters or destroys a local economic base. However, that outcome [displacement] is usually not entirely the result of the agent

alone, but rather *government response*” (2006: 6). In the case of the Katrina Diaspora, Dyson spends many chapters breaking down FEMA’s role in the displacement and migration of poor people from the Gulf Coast.

Two documentary films follow Black survivors of the Katrina disaster and illustrate the experience of removal and displacement. *Trouble the Water* (2008) is an intimate story of one family’s survival during the catastrophe of hurricanes Katrina and Rita. The documentary shows New Orleans immediately after the storm and juxtaposes the inaction of the government and military against the courage of ordinary citizens. Kim Rivers and her husband, Scott Roberts, are former drug dealers and high school drop outs who struggle to get on their feet after the storm, although Roberts does not want to return to the devastation of New Orleans, he and his wife ultimately return from out of state because they cannot find good-paying work because of their lack of education and certifiable credentials. Rivers’ brother, Wink, tells the story of surviving Katrina in the Orleans Parish prison where the prisoners were literally left to die as the guards evacuated with their families. In a poignant moment Rivers reflects on her experience as a “refugee” and says “it was like we lost our citizenship too.”

Robert Mugge’s film *New Orleans Music in Exile* (2007) tells the story of New Orleans musicians, writers, and producers who were displaced by the storm and who together formed the core of the New Orleans music scene. In this film the musicians and music promoters and fans ask the question of what it means for musicians to return to the city and help rebuild when there isn’t enough affordable housing, and there aren’t enough people returned home (or tourists) to participate in the culture; the interlocutors in the film make the claim that the 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th wards are the heart and soul of the city’s

musical heritage; and as the lower 9 goes, so goes New Orleans. Both Oliver-Smith and Michael Powers (Hartman 2006) agree that the response to catastrophe indicates the governments' as well as civil society's views on social responsibility as well as their political priorities. Powers illustrates this point by tracing a genealogy of American disasters and their responses, thus showing that there were plenty of models for the government to build upon and/or appropriate in order to assure the safety of all its citizens in the face of danger and disorder. Rather, he concludes that the Katrina Diaspora is the desired outcome of a process of willful neglect.

It is hard to interpret the situation as merely coincidental when one looks at the evisceration of the already segmented labor market. Sure, peoples' homes were damaged, but worse than that the entire city shut down and social services suspended. Because the job structure in New Orleans relied heavily on the tourism industry, the overwhelming number of jobs available are in the low-wage service sector e.g. hotel cleaners, desk clerks, security guards, cashiers, food servers and the like. These jobs are readily available in New Orleans pending the return of large-scale tourism to the city, however, these low-wage jobs are not enough to (re)build a life with, especially for households with children.

Neil Smith (2007) and Naomi Klein talk about the "disastrous accumulation" or "the shock doctrine" to which the Bush administration as well as the multinational corporations awarded no-bid contracts adhere. Both authors talk about how Katrina has been used by insurance agencies, land speculators and predatory developers to amass obscene profits for the private sector firms in charge of rebuilding. Because of the confusion and chaos left in the wake of Katrina and Rita, economic development that is

just and sustainable has been severely challenged: no bid rebuilding contracts did not go to local firms and businesses; minimum wage laws were suspended and then reinstated months later; migrant Latino laborers in addition to volunteers of all colors were solicited and these groups have been principally employed in construction and demolition, thereby depressing wages and shutting out U.S. and Gulf Coast workers who demand fair compensation. Given that the construction and demolition industries are male-dominated, the political-economic policies enacted in the name of disaster recovery and rebuilding have kept Black men from effectively 1) gaining a foothold in the local economic development; and 2) exercising a sense of agency and/or ownership over their neighborhoods and communities.

Conclusion

If taken in sum, the literature on Black identity & subject formation, the Black ghetto, and the post-Katrina historical moment all speak to the central and strategic use of violence, militarism, and state-sanctioned terror in the on-going race-making project. The birth of Afro-American culture and Black identity does not come about until one (formerly) ethnic or national subject is forcibly removed from her homeland, enslaved and brought across the Atlantic. Inherent in the experience of Black identity and a lingering undercurrent in Black culture is the sense of displacement and betrayal, restricted movement and access. Drake and Cayton (1945) remind us that the Black Metropolis would not be what is it without the effective use of restrictive covenants to bar would-be Black neighbors from becoming residents of predominantly-white municipalities; in the case of New Orleans, a segmented labor market wherein Black

workers are forced into low-wage service-sector jobs in the Tourism, Restaurant and Hospitality industries continues to ensure restricted access to opportunities for social mobility and economic development; the punitive political climate targets the Black man and/or woman who chooses to enter the underground economy rather than work a low-wage job. Author and legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2010) outlines the ways in which the ghetto is characterized by police surveillance and terrorism, and how criminalization is indeed a selective, racial project. Scholars Sara Kaufman (2006) and Leon Waters (2007) chronicle the ways in which during the Katrina disaster Black removal was coerced, and Black freedom of movement was restricted with the use of jails, concentration camps, and deadly military force.

Because the city has been somewhat ethnically cleansed through the violence of removal and gentrification, many Black leaders and activists in New Orleans are concerned with merely “stabilizing” the situation through political advocacy and reform. Of course, the individuals and institutions who lean more towards the pragmatic social service perspective (read: uplift) are involved in campaigns to expand affordable housing, and to reform the public health and education systems. On the other hand, there is a small but growing network of individuals and institutions who marry art and culture to political-economic analysis as they work to rebuild communities, to raise consciousness, and to cultivate effective leadership necessary to catalyze social change from below. Drawing from and contributing to discourses around race, culture, place, heritage and belonging, the cultural organizers and institutions that take center stage in the following chapters see the rebuilding of robust and resilient communities of self-aware, well-informed, and actively empowered Black residents as their primary concern.

Historical discourse as myth-making

In order to understand what is taking place in the present day, I find it imperative to explore New Orleans' storied past and explode some of the more conventional historiography, rife as it is with exceptionalism and exoticization. This chapter presents several of the more commonly rehearsed historical narratives about New Orleans; some histories emphasize the exotic, while others emphasize the exceptional, but each one serves a political purpose. By covering the various versions of New Orleans history, I hope to expose the power dynamics hidden in plain sight – much as the Katrina disaster in 2005 exposed the truth of deeply gendered racial oppression and class exploitation. The telling of New Orleans history is highly contested and involves mystifying and demystifying the legacies of resistance that are everywhere inscribed onto the physical landscape; the “official” narrative has largely been filtered through the lens of white supremacist apologies for slavery, serving to keep the status quo in place. However, the revolutionary history of the city, which has remained largely underground, is hidden in plain sight behind the local architecture, street names, confederate monuments, and it's even buried in the earth beneath the Bonne Carre Spillway.⁶

The contested natures of New Orleans' manifold historical narratives point to the culturally constructed dimensions of historical discourse. Historical discourse, in addition to bringing past events into more contemporary discussions, accomplishes “pragmatic work” – “cognitive, communicative, social, and political” (White 2000: 498). Narrativizing practices, on the other hand, turn past events into stories with coherent

⁶ Buried under the Bonne Carré Spillway – land that is owned and operated by the U.S. Corps of Engineers – are two major African cemeteries which remain from the period of enslavement. Neither cemetery is marked. Each time the Spillway is opened to divert rising floodwaters from the Mississippi River, a piece of its history is washed away.

beginnings, middles, and ends so as to render events “both comprehensive and persuasive” (ibid 497). Indeed, the form in which history is written greatly influences how its audience receives it. Therefore, effective narrativizing practices represent orderly and sequential historical events as “real, natural, important, relevant, and authoritative” (ibid loc.cit), thereby yielding a cohesive historical narrative. Constructed as it is in the story form, the individual historical narrative enters the inherently dialogical and plural realm of historical discourse in order to make meaning, refining the raw materials of the past.

Much like the realm of historical discourse wherein subjects seem to obviate their social positions (Genette 1976; White 1980), historical narratives in themselves are pregnant with ethnographic data given that they are narrated by subjects with distinct subjectivities. For example, Historian Nell Irvin Painter in her book *Sojourner Truth: A Life, a Symbol* (1996) outlines the ways in which Truth’s autobiography and speeches were recorded and manipulated by white observers who depicted Truth much more symbolically than factually. As a consequence, those contemporary accounts, shaped by the authors’ own biases, political commitments, and desires, have come to dominate the popular conception of Sojourner Truth – as well as how we think and feel about her – as a national symbol. And because Truth was illiterate, she was unable to maintain control over her image and legacy. The “master narrative” (Lyotard 1979) that has become popularly accepted of Sojourner Truth as the strong Black woman par excellence, was written by her white female contemporaries who either possessed or had access to influence, power and authority (Lyotard 1979; White 1980; White 2000). Painter, using Sojourner Truth as an example, demonstrates that the telling of history is an act of

knowledge production – a production steeped in and informed by the politics of raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized power dynamics.

French theorist Michel De Certeau (1988) sees historical narratives like the ones surrounding Sojourner Truth not as “cultural tools” (Wertsch 2000) which excavate a pristine past, but more as windows which provide insight into the contexts of creation for both the historical figure *and* the author of historical narrative, as well as the contexts for subject and identity formation within “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983). In *The Writing of Culture* (1988), De Certeau argues that authors of historical narratives write about the present and its political urgencies, thereby opening up the possibilities for imagining and enacting alternative futures. For prolific Black historian, Robin Kelley, this rings particularly true. In his treatment of Black Communists in Alabama (1990), Kelley rejects the top-down approach to history and successfully counters the notion that American Communism was simply an unquestioned extension of Communist International policy and doctrine. By emphasizing the roles of ordinary Black women and men as workers and activists, as well as emphasizing the role of extremist, white supremacist terrorism, Kelly’s narrative enters Southern historical discourse and opposes – with factual evidence – the “master” narrative that depicts Black women and men as contented or resigned in the face of American Apartheid. In his later works (1996; 2002), Kelley offers historical narratives of everyday activism and the Black radical imagination, so as to “reopen a very old conversation about what kind of world we want to struggle for” (2002: 7).

In the particular (peculiar?) case of New Orleans, competing historical narratives about the city’s exceptionalism open up, or close down, possibilities for struggle. New

Orleans is often referred to as the USA's most exceptional city, in large part because of its tripartite colonial racial structure. Indeed, in New Orleans specifically and Louisiana more broadly, the concept of race evolved somewhat differently than in the rest of the United States. As a friend and interlocutor once remarked "there is something different about whiteness in this place" (Wendi O'Neal. Personal communication, November 3, 2010). However, claims of New Orleans, and Louisiana's, exceptionalism tend to be rather overblown: Many exceptionalists, asserting that New Orleans resembles more of a Third World situation than any First World city, don't want to acknowledge the all-too-common wealth gap that exists everywhere in the United States.

Those claiming New Orleans exceptionalism also tend to rely on the Creoles of color as proof of an altogether different racial schema, while denying that persons of mixed racial ancestry are a rather common byproduct of European colonialism the world over; narratives about the city's exceptional history of race-mixing tend to downplay the cruel unity and brutal strength of the white supremacist project whether directed by the French, Spanish, or Americans. Proponents of New Orleans' exceptionalism celebrate the African roots of the city's parade culture and romanticize Black performance as resistance, falsely equating visibility with power (Regis 1999; 2001). However, as Historian Michael Martin makes clear, "Louisiana was a southern state that reflected the norms of its regional neighbors more often than it diverged from them. During the nineteenth century, those southern norms had come to be more and more defined by white supremacy and black subordination" (Martin 2011: ix). Good work done by historians and ethnographers of New Orleans examines the local, national, and perhaps also the international political economy, and recognizes the heterogeneity of Black culture

and the Black experience by allowing Black subjects to speak for themselves, while also locating the voices and experiences of Black people in New Orleans and Louisiana squarely within the African Diaspora or Afro-Atlantic dialogue. Authors who succeed in producing good work on New Orleans tend to fall outside of the established academic cannon, while enjoying strong local support from their communities of culturebearers, academics, and laypeople. These authors include Marcus B. Christian, Albert Thrasher, and Lolis Elie Jr., as well as lecturers and activists Leon A. Waters and Malcolm Suber. On the other hand, narratives that obfuscate and apologize for the white supremacist, capitalist, patriarchal status quo tend to be produced more contemporarily by historians who have not taken the time to combine robust archival research with an ethnographic approach or at least an attention to oral history. Echoes of this superficial understanding of New Orleans can be found by not only in books and journals, but also – and more insidiously in – taking any swamp tour, horse and buggy tour, ghosts of the French Quarter tour, Voodoo tour and the like.

But perhaps one thing that does make New Orleans unique in the context of U.S. history is the city's colonial past. As a "World City" (Sassen 2001; Massey 2007), New Orleans has always been situated as both a literal and metaphorical crossroads. It is a city forcibly established at a moment of interracial and intercultural contact, loaded as that moment is with pleasure, curiosity, fear, and violence. There have always been plenty of colors represented in the city of New Orleans, but that doesn't negate the fact that they all seem to line up and find their place over and against the Black majority. Historian Gwen Hall remarks that French male "explorers" were apt to live in community with the Native peoples; while Historian Jack Forbes asserts that "in Louisiana, the enslavement of

Americans was quite common from the very beginning of the colony, with the Chitimacha people being a special target but also with slaves being brought in from the Mississippi Valley” (1993: 54). The effect of Hall’s rendering is to emphasize the “softer side” of French colonialism; while Forbes explodes the notion of French colonial exceptionalism in dealing with “Americans.” Yet even as Louisiana’s Indigenous inhabitants were enslaved by the French and the British, there were also strategic alliances made that were never available to African groups in the New World.

Once the French, Spanish, and American invaders got through pushing Louisiana’s indigenous inhabitants north and west, and sending them as slaves to the Caribbean colonies they began to forcibly remove Africans from their homelands as well, but this time it was in the hopes of providing a stable labor force for the sparsely populated territory. African labor was a prized commodity, and therefore, so too was the African laboring person. While Historian Gwen Hall (1992) makes the claim that European slave masters “scrupulously” adhered to the rules laid out in the *Code Noir* in order to encourage the growth and cohesion of the Black family and population, this claim is not supported by the primary documents (Thrasher 1995). In effect, Hall’s history of the Afro-Creoles tends to depict New Orleans’ French colonial period as one in which things weren’t really that bad – at least not as bad as they were in the crueler British colonies. The idea of an exceptionally humane French colonialism is one that cannot be supported by the historical evidence (Dormon 1977; Thompson 1992; Forbes 1993; Thrasher 1995; Paquette 2009; Rasmussen 2011). But then, as now, racial formation was a process that was not totalizing, and allowed for a certain measure of agency. However, white supremacist colonization has done quite an efficient job at

keeping Africans and Indigenous people enslaved, oppressed and terrorized. And it continues to rely on the fact that a few Africans and Indigenous people would be enriched by their willing participation.

Racial and cultural politics of Creole identity

Of course, the skeptic will ask: But what about the *Gens de Couleur*? Doesn't their presence signal a complexity, and difference from the monolithic "one drop rule" concept of race so prevalent throughout the rest of the U.S.? With Africans at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, even the city's colonial racial structure was not all that unique; in places where European conquest took place and colonial rule was established there emerged a racial caste and buffer group of mixed racial origin, born from a legacy of sexual desire and sexual violence. In colonial Latin America, for instance, the notion of racial purity was biologized as having to do with "blood." "Pure" blood meant whiteness free of undesirable racial, ethnic, or religious "contamination;" pure blood also meant ready access to elite social status, political power, and financial wealth. Purity or uncontaminated whiteness existed in degrees within an anti-Black racial hierarchy and so mixed-race *mestizos* and *mulatos* generally enjoyed greater access to social, political, economic and cultural capital than their fully contaminated, Black counterparts (Dominguez 1986: 153).

The very existence of the free people of color in New Orleans as elsewhere was 1) a product of sexual violence and, 2) a mechanism for the perpetuation of white supremacy (Nagel 2003; Ballantyne 2005; D'Costa 2006). And in each instance, this mixed-race group tended to represent a liminal social stratum, strategically allying

themselves with whichever racial group was in power. While not always the case, in many instances mixed-race groups throughout the colonial world enjoyed socio-economic and cultural status superior to their darker-skinned brethren. This hybrid condition was no less true in colonial Asia (Mijares 2003; D’Costa 2006; Jayawardena 2007; Carton 2012) as it was in colonial Africa (Amselle 1998; White 1999; Jones 2010; Lee 2011) or the New World (Domínguez 1986; Wade 1997, 2009).

The majority of free people of color in New Orleans formed a social stratum that was comprised of two groups essentially: persons of perceivably mixed racial ancestry (i.e. Brown) and persons who did not appear phenotypically “mixed” (i.e. Black). The Brown people of color, in turn, were comprised of American Indians, as well as Creoles of color – essentially the non-white/non-Black portion of the population (Martin 2011: 3). Many of the early American-Indian and/or African-descended free people of color, no matter their phenotype, were individuals who were born into slavery and later had purchased their own freedom – or a loved-one, most likely a female relative, had purchased their freedom (Hall 1992: 269). Once they became free, people of color both Black and Brown, were prohibited from voting or holding office; they were not, however, prohibited from owning property (either land or other people). Sure there were some who identified with their enslaved brethren, but prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, they were the exceptions rather than the rule.

Ethnographer Virginia Domínguez (1986) argues that Creole identity was “politicized” by the Anglo-American political and economic incursion into the region, and was intensified by the Louisiana Purchase. Around the beginning of the 19th century Creole identity emerged as a cohesive cultural heritage and social group, but that even

still at this time the term was not attached to a particular racial ideology. At that time, it was common to hear white people as well as free people of color referring to themselves as “Creoles.” Domínguez asserts that Creole identity only becomes racially defined in the post-bellum period and beyond, because since so many people defining themselves as Creoles were also men of color, outspoken on the issue of universal male suffrage, white Creoles – who had lost social status and political power first during the Louisiana Purchase and later during the Civil War – decided to try and rescue their sense of dignity and their right to participate as white people in the new, rigidly polarized white supremacist binary racial caste system (1986: 142).

There was a brief and shining moment during Reconstruction when it seemed that the Black and Brown groups were organizing together to procure political and civil rights for all no matter what their color or status; but after federal troops were evacuated from former confederate strongholds, it became clear that this would not last long. White supremacist terrorism didn’t even stop with violence against Black and Brown people: Punishments usually reserved for Black men were visited upon 11 Italians who were publicly lynched in New Orleans in 1891. By March 30, 1893 the historically and culturally significant Congo Square would become by city ordinance “Beauregard Square,” a space designated for whites only. The *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision of 1896 put the nail in the coffin of organized Black-Brown unity against white supremacy with its doctrine of “separate but equal.” And by 1909, just when the Niagara Movement was picking up steam, a group of Brown Creole men came together to establish the Autocrat Club. The Club no longer makes use of discriminatory entrance policies, but nonetheless enjoys a bad reputation amongst Black people in the city thanks to their infamous “paper

bag” tests. Friends and contemporaries of mine recount how their parents were unable to go together to the Autocrat on account of one of them being “too dark.”

It would seem that there hasn’t been a whole lot of racial “shifting” going on outside of the vacillations of the Brown Creoles who, today, insist that Creole is a culture and not a race. Historically, though, they allied themselves with whichever group was in power, and not surprisingly that group has been principally comprised of white people. Caryn Cossé Bell, on the other hand, would say otherwise. Her book, *Revolution, romanticism, and the Afro-Creole protest tradition in Louisiana, 1718-1868* (1997) argues that New Orleans’ Creoles of Color participated in a long history of cultural resistance and revolutionary activism. Her arguments articulate well with Jack Forbes (1993) and others who have noted that this very strata/social group comprised of racially mixed persons has also presented a danger to the colonial racial regime – as it destabilizes and threatens to genetically annihilate white racial identity (Welsing 1991). Additionally, Bell’s assertion that the seeds of political radicalism are to be found in a mixed-race colonial society is supported by scholars of colonial Africa and Asia as well (Jayawardena 2007; Jones 2010; Carton 2012). Bell, Forbes, and others are clearly trying to rescue the Creoles of Color from a reputation of unearned (white) privilege, social elitism and racial opportunism which is outlined by authors like Albert Thrasher (1995).

Of course, the famed Louisiana Creole identity is not immune from the politics of appropriation whereby more powerful actors hijack the term for their own political gain. In fact, much of the debate around the use and misuse of the term Creole as a racial category stems from the origin myth spelled out by one of Louisiana’s most notable, homegrown historians and literary figures – Charles Gayarré. Charles Gayarré came

from an influential Creole family. Active in local politics, and a financial supporter of the Confederacy, Gayarré became a leader in the effort to salvage white Creole social status and political power in the 1880s and 1890s. Generating a Creole origin myth in which any and all references to American Indian or African ancestry were scrubbed clean, required a bit of linguistic gymnastics; and so Gayarré devised the adjective-noun split. As an adjective, creole simply signifies local or native birth, and might modify any number of things: tomatoes, Negroes, etc. As a noun, he insisted, Creole exclusively refers to white people of French and/or Spanish colonial lineage (Domínguez 1986; Hirsch and Logsdon 1992).

In written articles and lectures, Gayarré emphasized “the pure white ancestry of the Louisiana Creoles,” and denied the porous nature of the color line as “impassable” (Domínguez 1986: 144). Historian Joseph Tregle, Jr. notes that Gayarré’s audience must have been aware that the “alpine heights” separating Black from white was an outright lie; and, indeed, some in the audience “were also privy to the fact that he [Gayarré] had himself fathered a child in 1825 by a free woman of color” (Hirsch and Logsdon 1992: 181). But of course, with popular assertions that Creoles of any color might have a “touch of the tarbrush” (Domínguez 1986: 142), what were Gayarré and his ilk to do? The crystallization of Jim Crow called for complete subjugation of non-whites, and defined all non-whites by the “one-drop” rule. In order for white Creoles to continue to participate *as white people* in this arrangement, they must prove their racial purity.

The dueling understandings of Creole identity are more typical of American racial dynamics than exceptional of them. On the one hand, the Louisiana Creole is held out as some sort of example of a mythical, racially-harmonious past. On the other hand, the

Louisiana Creole must disavow the African frequently by claiming the “African” relative to be, in fact, an American Indian one (Thompson 2009). More often than not, however, any mention of African or American Indian ancestry was strictly prohibited. This duality is reflective of the master narrative of American history told in mainstream outlets, popular culture and in school text books. Indeed, while America tells itself that it is a “melting pot,” it seems as though the African and the American Indian have been melted away from the historical narrative.

New Orleans’ shifting racial hierarchy

New Orleans hasn’t been a Black-majority city continuously throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Thanks to the unrestrained violence of the Jim Crow era, wherein paramilitary groups of white supremacists like the White League, the Klan, and the Knights of the White Camelia, among many others terrorized Black and Creole communities with impunity, a significant out-migration to Los Angeles occurred among Creoles both Black and Brown during the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries. With the South attempting to rapidly industrialize, capitalist bosses were none too excited to keep wages low by inviting Irish, Italian, and German immigrants to settle in the city and seek employment in the shipping and petrochemical industries. To be sure, the “big whites” invited the little ones to come and work, and keep wages low, but these immigrants weren’t *really* white: They were poor.

The ruling elite of this city, after Louisiana changed from French to Spanish back to French and finally to American hands, were concerned with cementing their economic ties with the long-monied Americans. New Orleans capitalist elites formed the Boston

Club in 1841. The name of the club gives us a sense of the direction in which these men were looking for cultural trends and economic ties. Of course free people of color were not allowed to join fine establishments such as the Boston Club. In order for the so-called “Latin” whites to gain access to these types of establishments and networks, they had to denounce their proximity/intimacy with Blackness. And, ultimately, men of Spanish and French descent allied with the WASPS of the U.S. Northeast.

But apparently the city has had to make room for people and figure out where to place them in the grand scheme of things. Towing the white supremacist party line obviously places Black at the bottom of the hierarchy. American Indians and Brown Creoles and their lighter skinned kin are somewhere in the middle between white and Black, but then move up and down in relation to the hierarchy depending on what’s happening with the Black majority. Immigrant whites are placed clearly above varying strata of Brown people, but certainly below the New Orleans white elite, which is a group that includes French, Spanish, German, and English (Anglo) white folks. The Vietnamese people who came in the 1970s as a result of U.S. foreign aggression seemed to fit somewhere in the vicinity of the poor whites on the racial hierarchy. While their participation in the labor market has been segmented, they have been able to access capital in the form of property, loans, etc. and were in the unique position to vote as a bloc, thereby giving them a modicum of political power, allowing Vietnamese people to exercise a certain level of self-determination over their own community. Amongst second-generation Vietnamese New Orleanians, the social capital passed down generationally has only served to perpetuate the self-determination enjoyed by the Vietnamese community as whole (Zhou and Bankston 1994).

Latinos seem to be the newest wash of color on the post-Katrina New Orleans racial landscape. Although often labeled “Mexicans,” as it turns out, a large portion of the day laborers you see outside of places like Lowes and Home Depot are Honduran. They’re somewhere on the bottom of the hierarchy working with Black men who also find themselves hiring themselves out for a day’s income. There is a burgeoning Black/Latino unity movement taking place, catalyzed by the Peoples’ Hurricane Relief Fund (which disbanded in 2008), and carried on by the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice, among other groups. However, in a *New York Times* article published in 2009, journalist Adam Nossiter paints a very different picture.

Following up on the media representations of Black men as “looters,” and “thugs” in the days after Hurricane Katrina, Nossiter tells a story of an “under-the-radar crime epidemic” against “unarmed Hispanic workers.” Of course there are no corroborating data given that the crimes are committed by Black men against (often times) undocumented workers. Remarking on the “contrast between the massed laborers waiting for work at a gas station at the corner of Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and Claiborne Avenue and a group of [Black] men drinking beer in the median nearby,” the portrait is a clear, and quite familiar narrative in 21st century America: Latino men are good, hardworking, and helping to the rebuild the city; while Black men are lazy, criminal, and dependent on public largesse. Hopefully, the story of Black and Latino organizing against wage theft, which affects day-laborers of all colors, police terrorism, and class exploitation, will gain credence as the master narrative of Black/Latino relations in post-Katrina New Orleans.

Making myth out of the 1811 Slave Revolt

As discussed earlier in the chapter, different renderings of the same historical events can serve widely dissimilar political projects, as each telling is imbued with and informed by the tellers' own biases, prejudices, and predilections. In addition to the dissimilar interpretations of Black and Latino socio-political and economic relationships, we have seen the ways in which the story of colonial slavery has been told by different authors and makes possible alternative readings of the present and future. On the one hand, Historians Gwen Hall (1992) and Shannon Dawdy (2008) have emphasized a dynamic, if not chaotic, system of French slavery which depicts the French and Spanish as the more humane slave masters; this narrative, if brought into the present, lends itself to a paternalistic view of race relations, in which oppression and exploitation are seen as relatively "not that bad." On the other hand, Historian Albert Thrasher (1995), legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2010) and others have chosen to emphasize the systematic cruelty of the colonial regime with regards to slavery so as to encourage the present-day reader to see more modern forms of class exploitation and racial oppression as continuations of older designs. By drawing such a bleak picture, Thrasher's narrative in particular serves to present resistance and rebellion as the only viable alternatives. Indeed, New Orleans history is contested and mobilized toward divergent political agendas.

The story of 1811 is no exception. And in time for its 200th anniversary, the 1811 Slave Revolt gained renewed interest. This event, the largest African insurrection on American soil, exists as the iconic, inspiring moment in New Orleans' and Southern Louisiana's long history of unruliness and resistance to colonial/imperial rule. This long

history encompasses African aspirations for freedom manifested in multiple acts of collective rebellion and individual insubordination: African and American Indian aspirations for freedom from French colonial rule which precipitated the infamous massacre at Natchez in 1729; French aspirations for hegemony represented most aggressively by their resistance to Spanish rule in 1768 when ousted Spanish Governor Ulloa; and Southern aspirations to uphold their “way of life” both through the power of the state with the Confederate States of America; and through paramilitary violence as was seen in the 1866 massacre of some 100 Black Republicans at the New Orleans Mechanics Institute, and in 1874’s White League attack against the integrated Metropolitan Police force. Sure, New Orleans has a long and storied legacy of resistance to so-called foreign rule, but the celebration of that legacy depends on contemporary power dynamics.

Today, in fact, the 1811 Slave Revolt is celebrated in small circles amongst people in the historical know. This is thanks to the tireless efforts of the descendants of the 1811 heroes who have kept the story alive through oral tradition. Although there are various perspectives on this monumental uprising, it is essential that these voices be made central to the historical narrative if we are to learn to imagine a more liberating tomorrow from the events of yesterday.

One such voice which calls upon the strategic use of African American history is that of New Orleans-born political organizer, Leon A. Waters. Mr. Waters has been the single-most influential person in keeping the history of the 1811 Slave Revolt alive in the present day.



Figure 3: Leon A. Waters giving a bus tour of the 1811 Revolt

He grew up in Uptown New Orleans, not far from Tulane University, which today is a predominantly white and upper-middle-class neighborhood within walking distance to the city's only Whole Foods Market. Mr. Waters would visit relatives in St. John the Baptist Parish near present-day Montz and Norco each summer. It was there, in the so-called River Parishes, where he learned from his elderly Cousin Kizzy about the story of the 1811 Slave Revolt. As a child, he says, he didn't really understand what Cousin Kizzy was telling him. But as a young man, Mr. Waters began to think again about the story she told him. In 1994 he founded with some like-minded comrades the Afro-American History Alliance, and "as a result of a story that I had been verbally telling people for years, we began to investigate the 1811 Slave Revolt which resulted in the

publication of the book [*On to New Orleans!*] as well as the city-wide public commemorations” (Leon Waters, personal communication, 22 January 2011).

Albert Thrasher’s *On to New Orleans!* has the echoes of Leon Waters’ voice all throughout. As colleagues and comrades in the Afro-American Liberation League, they later became founding members of the Afro-American History Alliance. Both men would conduct research that would appear in the volume. *On to New Orleans!* is not merely a retelling of events, rather it traces the trajectory of African resistance from the so-called Slave Coast of West Africa to the U.S. South – with stops in between. But so many authors have set themselves to the task of discovering African “resistance”; Thrasher offers a fresh perspective by approaching primary sources “from the perspective of dialectical and historical materialism, the science that studies society and history in its development (1996: iv). *On to New Orleans!* remains the definitive study of the 1811 Slave Revolt not only because of its “scientific” approach, but also because it reproduces the pertinent primary documents in its lengthy appendices for easy review.

Thrasher tells us that ominous events foreshadowed the Uprising to take place on Tuesday, January 8, 1811, “when communications through to the Donaldsonville area were cut off by ‘depredations’ of the fugitive slaves [...] And when Gilbert Tomassin Andry, a member of a leading slave-owning family in St. John the Baptist Parish, was killed by slaves on January 2” (1995: 49). At the close of the fieldhands’ working day, just after sundown, on January 8, “the slave mutiny was launched at the Andry plantation” (ibid 50). Charles, a slave driver owned by the widow Deslondes and employed by the plantation owner Manuel Andry, was the principal leader. Charles, Thrasher asserts, had been brought from St. Domingue during its great conflagration. He

planned the uprising with fellow Africans owned by neighboring plantations; among them Harry, Guam, and others. Indeed, the majority of the other rebel leaders were newly-arrived Africans.

Disappointed by the unexpected removal of arms from their usual storage place, the African rebels armed themselves with whatever they could find – namely, agricultural tools. Even Charles Gayarré, writing of the uprising some 50 years later, was forced to acknowledge the military discipline with the rebels “marched along the river toward the city, divided into companies, each under an officer with the beat of drums and flags displayed” (cited in Thrasher 1995: 50). The vanguard led on horseback with the chants “On to New Orleans!” and “Freedom or Death!” As they marched through the heavy rain and the thick mud, the rebel army gathered more and more force. By early evening on Wednesday, January 9, 1811 the African army had covered 25 miles, burned down some 4 plantation houses, and swelled to well over 500 fighters. At the same time, Thrasher suggests an attack took place on the New Orleans armory. A two-pronged offensive, the uprising aimed “to destroy the whites” (ibid 51). However, “the actions of the traitors allowed most of the oppressors to get out ahead of the rebels and greatly facilitated the military counter-attack, since most of these slave owners took their arsenal of weapons with them, denying the slave rebels the needed fire power to carry through the subsequent stages of the revolt” (ibid 56).

Within the city of New Orleans, drastic measures were enacted to preclude the possibility of Africans and Creoles joining the uprising taking place upriver: Those brave souls who had attacked the armory were captured and executed in Congo Square. Africans were prohibited from gathering in numbers greater than 2, and were prohibited

from carrying weapons, including the walking sticks meant to steady the gaits of elders. They were regularly stopped and searched, and a 6pm curfew announced by cannon fire warned anyone on the street of what would happen should they be caught past the designated hour. Additionally, Governor Claiborne called a truce with Spain over the contested West Florida Parishes north of Lake Ponchartrain and instead redeployed federal troops and local militia to confront the rebel army.

Before daybreak on Thursday, January 10, 1811, federal troops joined forces with local militias raised by the German Coast slaveholders and a small number of sympathetic Free People of Color to attack the rebel army who were now resting at the vacant Fortier plantation. While the militias waited for federal back-up to encircle the rebel camp, “Charles’ forces evacuated the area in an orderly retreat. They fled into the swamps and then moved back upriver” (ibid 59).

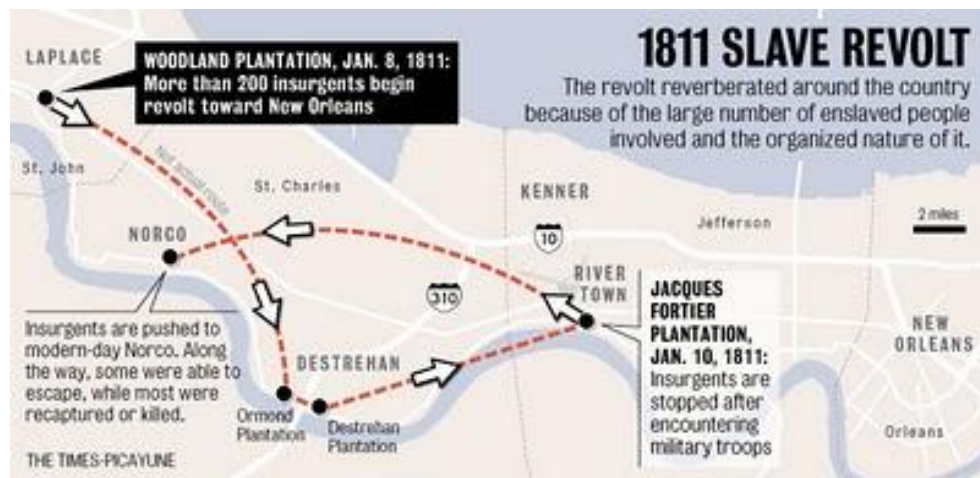


Figure 4: Retracing the route of the 1811 Rebels

Their last stand would take place on the Bernoudy plantation. Armed with agricultural tools, and having run out of ammunition for the few firearms they had been able to procure, the African army were overwhelmed and quickly massacred by the government forces. “Yet the main body of rebels refused to surrender” (ibid loc cit), and even as late

as February “the slave owners’ patrols met African fighters” (ibid 62). A hasty tribunal of plantation owners was set up at the Destrehan plantation on Sunday, January 13, 1811. The captured rebels were imprisoned, interrogated, and approximately 40 rebels were tortured and put to death. The heads of the executed were severed and placed atop pikes, lining the river road from New Orleans to the German Coast, where the Revolt had first broken out.

Although many historians have interpreted the 1811 Slave Revolt as a miserable failure, Thrasher points out one of its more immediate successes when he writes

Actually, in its thrust down the river, the slave army had accomplished quite a bit: On the East Bank, at least, they had forced the total evacuation of the area by the slave owners and their overt flunkies -- the overseers, privileged workers etc. Probably, from St. James Parish to their camp at Jacques Fortier’s plantation, some thirty miles, there was a more or less free zone, a liberated area, where the slaves could straighten their backs, come and go when they wanted, eat some good food that had been denied them, and of course they rejoiced at this opportunity. Those who did not join in with slave army as it passed, still supported the revolt by remaining in the liberated area and refusing to go to town. The slaves who stayed took this time to find relatives who had been torn from one another and put on different plantations. In the liberated zone, the runaway slaves locked up in the jails were freed and those slaves who were chained and held in blocks were likewise released (Thrasher 1996: 56).

Thrasher goes on to say that the 1811 Slave Revolt accomplished even more in its aftermath:

1. This revolt stimulated a whole range of revolutionary actions among the African slaves in the U.S.A. in subsequent years.
2. It facilitated the organization of broad anti-slave movements in and outside of the slave states.
3. It continued and invigorated the tradition of revolutionary struggle among the African slaves in the Territory of Orleans that would never abate (ibid 66).

In 1995, a year before the publication of *On to New Orleans!* the Afro-American History Alliance commenced public commemorations of the 1811 Slave Revolt in partnership with 6 schools,

as a result of a resolution we got the school board to pass. The board made a proposal at a public school board meeting and publicly recommended 9 recommendations to strengthen their proposal and we got the school board’s unanimous adoption. I’ll show you a copy of the resolution, the proclamation that was adopted by the school board.

Today we make it available in the name of the museum [LMAAH], because if you go to the school and ask for a copy they act like they can't find it. But the truth is not Katrina -- Katrina didn't destroy all the files, the water didn't come *that* high. Some of these files on the second floor. Anyway, it's an important proclamation because it states that from this day on that there shall be a public commemoration to honor Charles Deslondes and these women and men. Now for the first 3 or 4 years after we won this proclamation, the most the schools would do was they would make an announcement on the PA system. We told them that's not what we fought for. We want this damn thing *institutionalized*. It's a whole different thing. Y'all had us every year going to Lafayette Park to honor a criminal named John McDonough -- it was *institutionalized* the whole school system was shut down; all public schools had to bring their students to Lafayette to honor this man. All the white students would have their program, then after the whites students would have their program, the black students standing in the *sun* would then come up -- now y'all can honor him. [they had] wreath laying ceremonies, flowers and all this crap. From our history, from our studies the first group to challenge this was a man named Arthur Chaptal. He was at one time the head of the NAACP in the 1950s and this shit got to him. He lead an effective boycott whereby 98% of our people didn't come, didn't show up. This was in the 1950s, he effectively provided the leadership to say "we ain't going to this shit no more." After that, I don't know much of the history. Like a lot of things in history, things get started, they flare up, and there's a tendency for things to die down mainly because history teaches us that if you don't have committed leadership over the long-term, if you don't have a committed organization in place over the long-term, then you'll makes some gains and some concessions but you don't have the things in place, the materials, so it's almost like starting over again. So anyway, once we got that passed we were able to fight and then get them to start institutionalizing, meaning that we had a program in the school, we want this in the school, y'all gave all that attention to John Mac -- same thing for the people who fought against them, people who fought against people *like* John Mac. And then that began to start actually happening. And then Katrina. Katrina will come and set back all this work. First it would knock out the educators, the people who have to bring this to the kids. That's a major setback... So we've been on the road of coming back, and next year will be our first initiative to bring back what we started before Katrina. Like this year we just had a public event at the bookstore [Community Book Center] with me speaking, but we don't want that. We want to have the public parade again. Where we required that every school participated. That was a big fight. Cannot march with the American flag. We had people that vacillated... but these people were fighting *against* the flag and what it represents. So we can't have a parade carrying no goddamn American flag. The only flag we want out there is red, black, and green. Period... We're kinda getting started late, we gotta start early to have some public event in the street. no matter how small it is we gotta start it and get going (Leon Waters. Personal communication, January 22, 2011).

Although the public commemorations have not yet resumed, Leon Waters and Malcolm Suber, a colleague and comrade from the now defunct Afro-American History Alliance, offer educational walking and bus tours retracing the steps of the 1811 rebels.



Figure 5: 1995 African American History Alliance 1811 Slave Revolt Commemoration.

Waters' Hidden History tours and lectures have educated countless locals, tourists, and school children about the historic and contemporary significance of the 1811 Slave Revolt.

Commemorate the Heroic Louisiana Slave Revolt of 1811

January 1997 Events

* January 11

Martyrs Walk from Laplace to Montz, L.A.
and Wreath Laying Ceremony

Program & Commemorative Fair

* January 18

Martyrs Walk & Wreath Laying Ceremony
at Congo Square in New Orleans

Performances by

African Dancers and
Drummers
Musicians and others

Contact: Malcolm Suber (504) 283-6691
or Leon A. Waters (504) 897-3310
or write
AAHAL P.O. Box 51715, New Orleans, LA. 70151-1715

African American History Celebration
"Honor our Ancestors"

Commemorate the Heroic
1811 Slave Revolt
in St. John the Baptist & St. Charles Parishes
of Louisiana




Figure 6: 1997 African American History Alliance 1811 Slave Revolt Commemoration Program.

Historical discourse enters the academe: the Tulane Symposium

Having heard about the 1811 Slave Revolt at one of Mr. Waters' Hidden History lectures, and after having read about the events in Albert Thrasher's *On to New Orleans!*, Tulane History Professor Roseanne Adderley decided to discuss with her institution the possibility of convening an academic symposium as a part of a year-long commemoration of the 1811 Slave Revolt coordinated by the Destrehan Plantation (now a local tourist destination), the River Road Historical Society and the New Orleans African American Museum. With the support of its various departments, programs and centers, Tulane University hosted "Black Resistance in an Age of Revolution: A Symposium Commemorating the Bicentennial of the 1811 Slave Revolt in Territorial Louisiana" in October of 2011. While the symposium was in commemoration of the 1811 Slave Revolt, its panels were not exclusively dedicated to exploring the historic event. The opening panel presentation examined the events of 1811, while the rest of the sessions were dedicated to exploring various Caribbean uprisings, including the Haitian Revolution, for their historical and regional importance as well as their gender politics.

The Tulane Symposium began its first day with a panel presentation at the Freeman Auditorium, a small auditorium located in the Woldenberg Art Center, seating no more than 100 guests. The crowd was mixed, including some graduate students, some academics and other professionals. While there appeared to be a pretty balanced gender ratio, as is typical in institutions of higher learning, Black people, although represented, were not in the majority. The panel was comprised of four white male academics, and was facilitated by Raphael Cassimere, Jr., an African American Professor Emeritus of

History at the University of New Orleans. Each paper presented a different angle from which to interpret the events of the 1811 Slave Revolt.

The first presenter, hailing from Cornell University, hypothesized that the 1811 Slave Revolt could not have succeeded because it transpired during “the second slavery,”

an integral part of a decisive turn in human history, a great transformation in which the western economies grew at rates never before seen. One thing that made the new slavery distinct from what came before was not only that it was an essential contributor to economic modernization, but that it was itself modern and dynamic. the efficiency in the second slavery, unlike in the first, increased over time...At the same time, essential characteristics of the 2nd slavery made it much more resistant to attack from within than its predecessor (Baptist 2011).

The presenter concludes his remarks by suggestively asking the audience: “did the 1811 Revolt have a chance of success, or had the moment at which such rebellions could succeed passed?” (ibid).

The second presenter, a professor at Sherbrooke University in Québec, was the only one on the panel that dealt directly with the primary sources documenting the 1811 Slave Revolt and its aftermath. He doesn’t dispute the size of the insurrection or argue for its inevitable failure, rather the second panel presentation examines the primary sources for possible motives: “I strongly believe that they [archival records of the 1811 Revolt as documented by white slave-owners] stand more as reflections of the emerging planter class desire for unity and its fear of destruction than actual records of a slave insurrection. I don’t deny that there was a slave insurrection, I believe we should step back from those records” (Leglaunec 2011). Stepping back from the widely accepted translation of Jupiter’s “confession” that the rebels were aiming “to kill whites” (*détruire les blancs*), the second panelist “insists” on the literal translation that the rebels were aiming “to destroy the whites” (ibid). Armed with this more accurate appraisal of rebel motives, the second presentation argues that this stated motive, combined with the fact

that the uprising was carried out by a pan-ethnic body of fighters with English, French, Akan, Kongo and Islamic names, should be taken as evidence that a new racial construction of “Blackness” had emerged. Sidestepping the question of the 1811 Slave Revolt’s success, the presenter concludes that “armed with this modern type of identity, it may be that slaves forced whites to put on a dramatic show of their emerging whiteness for the first time in the early American period” (ibid).

The third presenter, from Georgetown University, as well as the fourth and final presenter, the Director of the Center for Louisiana Studies, University of Louisiana, Lafayette, avoid addressing the 1811 Slave Revolt directly. Instead, the third presenter takes as his point of departure the fact that there were traitors and opportunists who were rewarded for their loyalty to the white plantation owners of the German Coast. The final panel presentation makes a case for rejecting the black-white racial context in which the insurrection took place. Arguing that Louisiana’s “three-tier caste system had a particularly significant impact on Black resistance,” the final presenter goes on to say

While the 1811 Slave Revolt verified one of the greatest fears of whites in Louisiana, it dispelled another: for nearly two generations, most whites in Louisiana suspected that free blacks would, when given the opportunity, join revolting slaves if not instigate them, in tearing down Louisiana’s three-tiered social structure. This did not happen. In fact, in his reports summarizing the 1811 episode, Governor Claiborne clearly states that a battalion of free men of color offered their services in quelling the disturbance. And that they had performed their duties ‘with great exactitude and propriety’ (Wilson 2011).

Interestingly, the Georgetown University presenter does not make any reference to the presence of the free people of color nor to the three-tiered racial caste system as playing any significant role in the counter-resistance of traitors to the cause. Rather, this presenter hopes to counteract the overly celebratory narrative of resistance which accompanies most tellings of the 1811 Slave Revolt:

It may seem perverse to even raise this question during a commemoration of the 200th anniversary of the 1811 Slave Revolt; nevertheless, it was a question that concerned

people who had more than an academic interest in the fate of slave resistance. And there is nothing to be gained today by sweeping it under the rug. Counterresistance is something of an embarrassment of the dominant historiography of slavery that *focuses on and celebrates* resistance. But I think there is a new historiography emerging, with new sensitivities to the dynamics of conflict among slaves, and critical perspectives on the idea of slave agency that open up a possibility for a more realistic understanding of the politics of slave resistance -- by the politics of slave resistance I mean the process of choosing sides, or perhaps ducking for cover (Rothman 2011).

“Resistance isn’t all that it’s cracked up to be, seems to be the theme of this panel!” comments one audience member – a middle-aged man with brown skin, perhaps of Southeast Asian descent – during the panel Q&A. And so it did seem. Amongst the panel presentations were remarks diminishing the size and scope of the insurrection. For example, the first presenter downplays the size of the 1811 Slave Revolt saying that even Charles Deslondes could only muster (at most) some 500 people to fight for freedom as opposed to the tens of thousands that had been recruited during the course of the Haitian Revolution (Baptist 2011). In that same vein, the second presenter begins his presentation by pointing out the vast majority of the German Coast’s slaves did not participate in the rebellion (Rothman 2011).

In the Symposium’s program, the 1811 Slave Revolt is contextualized by the revolutionary changes taking place in the late 1790s. The actual events of the uprising are synopsized as follows:

Late in the evening of January 8th, 1811, a group of enslaved Africans and African-Americans launched an insurrection on the plantation of Colonel Manuel Andry, located approximately thirty-six miles northwest of New Orleans. The leader of the revolt was a mulatto slave by the name of Charles Deslondes, said to be originally of Saint Domingue, who at the time was temporarily employed by Colonel Andry. The insurgents stormed the manor house, severely wounding Colonel Andry and killing his son Gilbert.

From the Andry plantation the rebels moved downriver towards New Orleans, torching and looting residences along the way, and swelling their ranks with the enslaved from neighboring plantations and maroons living in the nearby woods. Contemporary accounts place the number of insurgents anywhere between 150 and 500. White inhabitants in the area, forewarned of the advancing slave army (some by their own slaves), fled to New Orleans. The rebels killed another sugar planter, Jean-Francois Trépagnier, who had remained behind to defend his plantation.

Governor William Claiborne learned of the uprising on the morning of January 9th and hastily called out militia groups to crush the rebellion. They were to be joined by

a detachment of U.S. Troops that happened to have arrived in New Orleans just days before. The wounded Manuel Andry had also managed to round up some 80 local militia troops and vigilantes. By the evening of January 9th, these forces met the slave army near the plantation of François Bernard Bernoudi. Armed with cane knives, axes, hoes, and a few small arms, the slave army was soon decimated by their well-armed opponents.

Those who were not killed in the battle were captured and brought to the nearby plantation of Jean Noel Destrehan [sic], where they were detained and tried by a tribunal of local officials. Those who had managed to escape into the adjacent woods were hunted for days, including Charles Deslondes, who was captured on January 11th. In total, at least sixty-six participants in the rebellion were either killed in battle or summarily executed. At least twenty-nine more were executed after the trials at Destrehan and separate trials in New Orleans. The severed heads of the executed were put on spikes and displayed according to official parish records “as a terrible example to all who would disturb the public tranquility in the future.”

Although other slave rebellions have received far greater attention both in popular history venues and in academic arenas, the 1811 Rebellion was both a singular and an emblematic event which occurred in the midst of an age of revolutionary change for enslaved African-descended peoples through the Americas. This era, beginning in the late 1700s, was marked most significantly by the success of the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804).

The works consulted for the above synopsis include Albert Thrasher’s *On to New Orleans!*, Daniel Rasmussen’s *American Uprising*, as well as three articles published in *Louisiana History*, the Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association. Consulted works also included a doctoral thesis as well as an article excerpted from a forthcoming book on the 1811 Slave Revolt. With so many expert sources, the memory of the 1811 Slave Revolt seems to be guaranteed its place in history; however, the powerful and celebratory mythologizing of the event by Black scholars and laypeople alike presents something of an enigma to authors like Baptist and Rothman among others.

The interpretation offered in the above synopsis draws together disparate sources, but fails to demonstrate the limitations of and debates within contemporary historiography. For instance, while some sources point to Charles the rebel leader as a native of St. Domingue (Dormon 1977; Thompson 1992;), others maintain that his origins cannot be confirmed (Rodriguez 1992; Paquette 2009); and Rasmussen (2011) asserts that Charles was born on the German Coast in Louisiana. Furthermore, the above passage asserts that the rebels marched to New Orleans “torching and looting residences

along the way,” however, both historians Albert Thrasher (1995) and Robert Paquette (2009) argue that the property damage done to the plantation estates on the way to New Orleans was quite minimal given the scale of the uprising. Interestingly, the above passage remarks on the alleged “looting” done by the rebels but says nothing of their military-style discipline, a fact emphasized not only by Thrasher and Paquette but also by Thomas Marshall Thompson (1992) and Daniel Rasmussen (2011); their assertion of the sophistication of the disciplined attack is also supported by prominent Louisiana historian – and grandnephew of Jean Noel Destrehan – Charles Gayarré (1854).

Finally, the above passage notes that the slave army was “decimated by their well-armed opponents” but goes no further in its description of the confrontation or its more lasting effects. Several of the works consulted make mention of the barbarity of the white response to the uprising (Dormon 1977; Thomspson 1992; Thrasher 1996; Paquette 2009), these sources also clarify that while the uprising was a tactical failure, it was a strategic success; the 1811 Slave Revolt succeeded in disrupting business as usual on the sugar plantations of southern Louisiana and provoked the assembly of militia forces designated to provide a standing police force for unruly Africans (Rodriguez 1992); the uprising forced white plantation owners to call into question the viability of the slave system (Dormon 1977); reported by 90 percent of America’s newspapers, the uprising prompted harsher legislation nation-wide, aimed at subduing and controlling the “domestic enemy,” while galvanizing anti-slavery sentiment and mobilizing the abolitionist movement (Thompson 1992). By leaving out these precious details, the above passage presents a missed opportunity for the Tulane Symposium to open up a

larger discussion around the historical and cultural significance of the 1811 Slave Revolt in relation to the contemporary moment of its 200th anniversary commemoration.

Historical discourse and poetic license: ‘Rumours of War’

While the Academy is most often the site of knowledge production, the arts are also important arenas from which to enter historical discourse. Theater, in particular, is a form which utilizes narrativizing practice no less than academic writing does, and thereby contributes to intellectual conversations and understandings of historic events.

Advertised in the Symposium program was the play “Rumours of War.” With a two-week run that overlapped with Tulane’s weekend-long event commemoration of the 1811 Slave Revolt, “Rumours of War” was re-mounted just in time to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the events of 1811.

This play was put on by ArtSpot Productions, a small theater company based in New Orleans and led by a young white couple both born and bred in the city. The Artistic Director, Kathy Randels, a 40-something white woman raised in the more affluent neighborhood of Lakeview, is committed to using theater as a platform to interrogate social inequalities; she publicly acknowledges the role that local Black theater has played in shaping her sense of mission as well as her aesthetic choices. Moreover, she cites John O’Neal and the Free Southern Theater as principal inspirations. However, grounded in her experience as a middle-class white woman, Kathy’s work at ArtSpot takes a decidedly second-wave feminist stance in its conviction that the personal is indeed political. This was definitely the case in her production “Rumours of War.” In

her Director's Note from the 2011 run, Kathy explains some of the process that led to the contemporary production:

Many visions have come to me in the process of creating this piece. The first was an image of a performance in three parts examining war: in Society; between a Mother and Daughter; and within the self, through disease. I created the last part you will see tonight, "Lullaby," first -- in college, in 1989. It was a duet retelling the Abraham and Isaac story between a mother and daughter. I directed the three pieces in basically the form you will see tonight ten years ago at the CAC [Contemporary Arts Center]. I stumbled upon the 1811 Slave Revolt then, because I was working with my brother Jim through the Students at the Center program and he was working with Leon Waters and Malcolm Suber and the African American History Alliance to get the story of the 1811 Slave Revolt out to a wider public, especially New Orleans public school children. Ten years later, Monique Moss (who reprises her role from the original production and now co-directs) and I have been able to re-envision the piece together. We have intentionally focused on commemorating the people who died in the 1811 Slave Revolt, and on those who survived to tell the story. It has been a great challenge and a deep honor to attempt to embody what might have happened 200 years ago" (ArtSpot Productions 2011).

It is important to note that Randels sees this play as an ensemble effort. It was co-presented by the New Orleans African American Museum, who so graciously donated its Treme villa-style estate so that ArtSpot could stage a site-specific production. "Rumours of War," was also co-directed by a talented African-American scholar and choreographer, Monique Moss whose attention to local African-based cosmologies and spiritual practices was evident in the dance aesthetic of the third act, "Lullaby." Finally, Kathy acknowledges Leon Waters and Malcolm Suber for having introduced her to the topic. In preparation for the re-mount, ArtSpot Productions would return to the source by asking the former founding members of the Louisiana African American History Alliance to act as consultants on the production, making sure that "Rumours of War" be authentic to the spirit of the 1811 rebels as well as historically accurate in its re-enactment of events. To that end, Mr. Waters and Mr. Suber led the cast and crew, as well as the staff of both the Museum and the theater company on a Hidden History bus tour retracing the route of the 1811 Revolutionaries as they marched on to New Orleans in hopes of establishing the second Black Republic.

Taking the time to re-envision the production with so many new collaborators, Kathy presented a play in three acts. At the end of the day, however, she maintained full creative control. As the audience enters the gates of the New Orleans African American Museum, our path is lined on either side by Black men and women standing on wooden stumps. Each character is whispering his or her story to the passersby. Collectively, there is no one narrative that emerges, only a cacophony of voices. As the sound swells, the characters abruptly end their tales, fleeing from their perches only to be seen again in the third and final act. Our attention is then directed to the museum's wide veranda, as a solitary Black man tells in poetic prose the chronicles of a peoples' resistance to dehumanization, genocide, and enslavement. His monologue ends climactically with a shout: "you can kill the revolutionary, but you cannot kill the revolution!" This was the prologue, our program informs us.

As the lights dim, the audience is escorted to the brick-laid courtyard where a lavish dinner table is set somewhat apart from a small gazebo. There are white bodies strewn about, indicating this was certainly a dinner party gone awry. The lone survivor stands above the scene, a slender Black man dressed in French colonial style. It looks as if the 1811 Slave Revolt has come and gone, until the bodies silently pick themselves up and place themselves back at their seats. This first act takes place at the home of "The General," a white slave-owner whose absent-minded paternalism towards his enslaved captives acts as a foil for the younger white "Michel," The General's cruel and impetuous son. Entitled simply "War," the first act attempts to unpack the various scales at which "War" seems to rage. On the other hand, there is the conflict between the white father and son; the General is reluctant to raise troops based solely on "hearsay," believing as he

does that his slaves are too happy or too incompetent to rise up against him. Michel wants nothing more than to put those savages in their place for even deigning to resist.

On the other hand, there is the war on the psyche of the Black male house slave, “Lindor”; while he is better clothed and more well-spoken than our hero Charles Deslondes, Lindor must suffer the abuse of his child-like oppressors: Party guests laugh as they take turns dropping their wine glasses, watching with amusement as Lindor runs to catch them before they hit the ground. Towards the party’s end, Michel offers Lindor food from the table, but Lindor must eat it off the ground. Finally, these abuses stir the double consciousness of Lindor himself, as he wrestles with whether to participate in the uprising or not. Lindor’s foil, Charles, sees no reason to spare the lives of such a venal bunch, and finally rouses Lindor to avenge his own dehumanization. The climax comes when Charles duels the General while Lindor simultaneously spars with Michel. The first act closes with the white bodies strewn in the same way they were when the audience first happened upon them. And now, we are led to believe, the Revolt is really underway.

Rather than picking up in the middle of the action, the second act entitled, “The White Woman of the West,” takes the audience on a detour. As we proceed to the next courtyard we are astonished by the spare and simple beauty of a large wooden tent covered on all sides with white linens billowing in the evening breeze. The over-sized cube seems to be bursting with light and swaying with constant movement. Once the audience is seated around the tent, a soft humming begins and we are hailed by a white woman dressed completely in white. She busily ties each linen to a tent post, exposing the interior of the cube to be a bare wooden floor with a wash basin and a single chair.

“The White Woman of the West” introduces herself as “Josephine” the General’s wife. Josephine’s monologue provides us with a plausible back-story as she recounts the trauma of fleeing St. Domingue for Louisiana at the height of the Haitian Revolution. Although not a general, she too has known war.

Recently, Josephine has taken ill and has been quarantined to this lonely room. Although her African “girl” has been plying her with potions and tinctures she gets no better, and seems to be losing her mind. Josephine is at once paranoid and romantic, oppressor and oppressed. She cruelly banishes her “house girl” to the fields, while she pines away for the attentions of Lindor. About three quarters of the way through the second act, Lindor enters the room, although he does not speak. Josephine tells us she is waiting for him so that she can give him the key to the gun closet. Of course, alone with Lindor in her chambers, Josephine coquettishly hides the key in her bosom, daring Lindor to take it. The two dance, then struggle, wordlessly until Josephine finally succumbs to her illness and Lindor stows away with the key in hand.

Finally, in the third act, “Lullaby,” the audience is given an act comprised entirely of Black men and women. Lindor brings the key to a grassy yard where Charles Deslondes and the martyrs from the prologue are waiting. In this act, there are few if any words, the conversation is carried out entirely through dance. Whereas Charles and Lindor were the principal Black protagonists in the first act, in the third they figure mostly as ensemble members. Providing a much needed counterpoint to “The White Woman of the West,” “Lullaby” features two Black women as its main protagonists: A large Black woman with long locs, wrapped high like a crown instructs her daughter, using only movement and repetition. The style of movement the two women embody is

reminiscent of the Dunham technique: both bodies are continually in polyrhythmic motion, isolating their upper and lower halves, extending their legs without pointing their toes (O'Connor 1999; Fischer-Hornung and Goeller 2001). Katherine Dunham herself wrote that the technique she crafted

is a series of movement patterns, isolations, progressions and exercises based on primitive rhythms in dance. These patterns create an awareness of time, space, form and function derived from their most basic interrelationship. Dunham Technique is a series of exercises and movement forms, that if mastered, will flow in a logical order into combinations of movements and choreographic patterns (Rose 1990: 15).

It is clear that the two women are having a conversation through dance, given that their movements and patterns build upon and flow into one another. And, indeed, the entire third act is something of a tribute to Dunham – and here is where Monique Moss, the Co-Director and woman dancing the role of the daughter, betrays her anthropological roots – because it takes what might have been a clandestine ritual out of the realm of the sacred and into the realm of performance art (Rose 1990; O'Connor 1999; Fischer-Hornung and Goeller 2001). The final act takes on a more spiritual and metaphysical perspective in understanding the underlying roots of the rebellion, and is, therefore, much more difficult to decipher. However, the ritual which “Lullaby” enacts becomes more intelligible at its conclusion, as the dancing ensemble transform themselves into ready warriors, exiting the “stage” with vociferous cries of “On to New Orleans!”

The ArtSpot Productions play “Rumours of War,” seemed a rather disjointed theatrical mosaic more than anything else. The details of the 1811 Slave Revolt are lost and instead the audience is left to ponder the unique perspectives represented by various characters in disparate settings. While Kathy Randels and Monique Moss both had a hand in shaping and directing the production, it was clear whose voice predominated. The Prologue – lasting only 10 minutes – was the only piece in the play in which the

Black ensemble are able to give voice to their stories of enslavement and liberation. From there, the first act “War” seems to want to point out the immorality, decadence and madness of enslaving another human being, but instead it depicts the horrors of enslavement as mere acts of petty meanness against a peer yearning for inclusion. In this instance the white party guests are cruel, but only in the way that children are cruel; the essential and inherent violence of enslavement is avoided.

Because Lindor spends so much of his time conflicted as to whether he should join the uprising or whether he should resign himself to the fleeting privileges of being a house slave, the play pushes the everyday enslaved masses away from the center of the story. But as he makes his decision he is not weighed down by the sacrifices of survival. Lindor seems not so much disgusted by his oppressor’s opulence and callousness, but enamored by their status and the material things in their possession. For a man in his position, one imagines that he has a host of options if he is serious about pursuing freedom: marronage in the swamps and bayous, flight to Mexico, passing for an anonymous free man of color in the bustling city of New Orleans, or armed struggle against his oppressor. These options were not laid on the table, and none were explored for their possible and violent consequences. Men and women like Charles Deslondes who are defiant, angry, and determined to change their own fates through armed resistance must wait for another production in which to tell their own stories.

Even with an African American Co-Director, “Rumours of War” was a play that did not succeed in centering the voices of the African heroes of the 1811 Slave Revolt. In the second act, “The White Woman of the West,” Kathy Randels’ “Josephine” is given almost thirty minutes of monologue; Lindor doesn’t manage to receive that much

uninterrupted airtime in the first act. With so much to say, Josephine is, by far, the most full and complex character in the show. Monique Moss as well as some of the other Black cast members all expressed the same sentiments: Kathy just wouldn't compromise on "The White Woman of the West." She was determined to keep her character in the storyline, and she was determined that the events of 1811 be largely filtered through the eyes of Josephine the madwoman.

It would seem that the intent was to demonstrate the precarious position of white women under the regime of white supremacist patriarchy; however, in her cloistered room, buried under layers of white petticoats, Josephine read mostly as a damsel in distress. For example, much is made of the (imagined) sexual relationship between Josephine and Lindor; this plot detail rehearses the master narrative of Black male sexual deviance that is so clearly spelled out in *The Birth of a Nation*. This narrative could have been given a fresh perspective had the audience been asked to ponder whether Lindor had the power to freely consent to engaging in a relationship of any kind with the mistress of the plantation. Unfortunately, the intimate relationship between Josephine and her "slave girl" – who is never given a name – is left unexamined.

When finally, the Black characters are given the stage, they are rendered mute. The martyrs from the prologue never again speak their own names. "Lullaby" the third act, relies much more heavily on the audience's imagination than did the first two acts, and after about an hour and a half of theater one's imagination begins to tire. The audience imagines that the drums and the dancing are vehicles through which our Black protagonists communicate, but unfortunately because there are no scenes in the third act in which the characters are speaking to each other about their plans to revolt, the

opportunity to learn more about the strategy and organization of the uprising is lost. In the end, the invitation to imagine a freer world, one inspired by the faith and the fury of the 1811 martyrs, remains unopened.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter, I introduced the contested idea that New Orleans is a city apart from the American norm. To support this exotic exceptionalism the Creoles (of color) are often presented. However, even a three-tiered racial caste system represents a distinctly anti-Black hierarchy. And this arrangement is not at all exceptional given the master narrative of American national identity. White Creoles such as Charles Gayarré participated in an American tradition when he vehemently denied the history of racial proximity and miscegenation amongst Creoles in colonial New Orleans. Gayarré's impassioned speeches pleaded for entry into the white mainstream, and ultimately white Creoles joined German, Irish, Italian and French immigrant groups in assimilating into American whiteness over and against the perceived threat of Blackness.

While this chapter continues the discussion of the race-making project by examining the formation of racial hierarchies, this chapter is also very much about exposing and demystifying the legwork as well as the intellectual and ideological work, which complements the essential violence of race, and which is necessary to elevate events and experiences to the level of historical discourse and perhaps even myth. By tracing with broad strokes the historical contours and cultural politics of Creole identity and Louisiana's enduring racial hierarchy, as well as those of the interpretations and

applications of the 1811 Slave Revolt – all of which some scholars and laypeople might point to when defending New Orleans’ exceptionalism with the U.S. geopolitical context – I aim to highlight the centrality of storytelling and mythic speech in the production of knowledge and the practice of historical commemoration.

New Orleans is a city whose long and storied past seems so tangibly ever-present to its residents and to tourists alike. Artists and activists engaged in the on-going struggles to reclaim their homes and rebuild their communities in a socially just and sustainable manner, draw strength from as well as parallels to the strategic victories of mythic leaders long gone. Indeed, like the ebbs and flows of the mighty Mississippi, “there is a river” of Black struggle and protest in New Orleans, a river which continues to transform the shape and character of its surrounding landscape.

As was seen in the case of the 1811 Slave Revolt, the way in which history is told and by whom have as much to do with the present and future as it does with the past. In some cases, the telling of the story of 1811 opens up possibilities for present and future struggle; in other instances, the potential for struggle is greatly diminished by its telling. For Leon Waters, and Albert Thrasher, for example, the 1811 Slave Revolt is an opportunity to engage with ordinary people, especially Black people, about the revolutionary history which is their legacy to inherit and pass along. Strategically, the story of the uprising is told in such a way that a local audience will be excited to take pride in the actions of their presumed ancestors; that they will be inspired and empowered to connect past injustices with present ones.

Mr. Waters’ colleague, Roseanne Adderley, an academic, called together a conference to explore the historical impacts of the 1811 Slave Revolt, yet did not invite

the foremost scholar on the subject to participate in any capacity. This slight – as it was perceived by Waters himself – revealed the ways in which the Academy works to establish expertise and produce knowledge about a particular subject. Given that Mr. Waters and his colleague Mr. Suber were not affiliated with a nationally-recognized institution of higher-learning, myth-making became an alternative vehicle with which to enter into the historical discourse.

The white male academics for whom the events of January 1811 is intellectual fodder all made clear that they felt celebratory language is fraught with problematic representations. But problematic for whom? Indeed, for the panelists at the Tulane Symposium, on the other hand, the story of the 1811 Slave Revolt is a specimen to be observed from various angles. For Kathy Randels and her ensemble cast the story of the 1811 Slave Revolt is rich material to interpret artistically. Because the interpretation is filtered through the aesthetic and political sensibilities of its principal director, the play, *Rumours of War*, ends up being mostly the story of the oppressed white woman with the events of 1811 as mere back-story. With so many interpretations of the event and its significance, the 1811 Slave revolt has entered into the realm of myth in the Malinowskian sense that “it is not an idle tale, but a hard-working active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of faith and moral wisdom” (1954 [1926]: 177). While the story of the 1811 Slave Revolt has been told from various perspectives and with various purposes – artistic, intellectual, political – ultimately, the African proverb rings true: Until the lion writes his own story, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. For this reason, the Civil Rights and Black Power/Arts Movements in New Orleans have been given much greater attention; their

participants have continued to tell their stories, in hopes that such fortifying myths will be carried along by a strong current and the work of movement building taken up anew by the next generation. It is to these stories of action and adventure, fellowship and communion, victory and disillusionment that I now turn.

A survey of New Orleans' late 20th century Black-led social movements

On a cool New Orleans evening in May 2010, I sat on the floor in the back of the Seventh Ward Neighborhood Center to hear Mama Dodie Smith-Simmons talk about her involvement with the Civil Rights Movement here in the city, some 50 years ago. The event was the first of a series called “Talkin’ Revolution,” sponsored by the Patois International Human Rights Film Festival and Junebug Productions, Inc. – two local organizations, one white-led and the other Black-led respectively, concerned with promoting social justice through the arts.

The racial make-up of the event was overwhelmingly white. At first glance, it seemed that the only Black people who were there were the ones facilitating the program: Wendi O’Neal and her father John O’Neal representing Junebug, and Stephanie McKee, representing the 7th Ward Neighborhood Center. Scanning the crowd more thoroughly this time, I noticed there were a few Civil Rights Movement veterans, with only a small handful of Black young people (my friend and I, Wendi’s girlfriend, a young man whom I recognized from previous Patois events, an attractive young Black woman with her

pressed hair in a messy bun, and a middle school kid). The overall age range seemed to be 20s/30s. Of course, journalist Jordan Flaherty was there keeping his finger on the pulse of Black activism and organizing (as a journalist, he's an event junkie of the highest degree, I see him at *all* of the Black cultural events in the city, and I mean *all*). What's ironic about this scene was that while the discussion mostly detailed the injustices Black people suffered at the hands of white citizens and the law enforcement agencies designed to protect their personal and property rights, non-violence was never questioned as a tactic or a strategy. Surprisingly, Mr. Waters was noticeably absent from this event, having spoken at the Patois Film Festival just weeks prior. And although long-time activist, Malcolm Suber, was in attendance, the discussion did not include an examination of how the political repression of the past has evolved to shape the social and political-economic conditions of the present.

When we finally left the event, a few of us were standing outside the Seventh Ward Neighborhood Center (my friend and I, Wendi and her girlfriend, Mama Dodie, Jordan, Stephanie, and Emily – a white Patois staffer) chatting and saying our goodbyes. Right before our eyes a white sedan turned down the street only to be followed by the flashing lights of a police patrol unit and pulled over. Immediately, the driver was made to stand on the sidewalk with his hands on the car while the officers ran his plates or radioed in to the main operator. My friend and I suggested that we all walk over and observe the interaction so the police would know not to try any foul play. Everyone quickly got in their cars muttering and complaining about the drug problems in the neighborhood, or the unbridled liberties taken by the NOPD. I wondered: How can we leave an event about civil rights struggle and see something like this and not do anything?

I was flabbergasted, and frustrated. I *always* see flashing lights on St. Claude Avenue. *Always*. And up until that point I had never heard a New Orleanian call this city a police state. The language to name it doesn't even exist here. And perhaps unsurprisingly major struggles have been waged over selecting an independent police monitor to enforce the Department of Justice consent decree. There have been plenty of documented civil and human rights abuses perpetrated by the NOPD, but no one has set up a community police watch to keep their power or authority in check. How can we have so many people who claim to be progressive and yet this idea has not been tried? Where is the strength in our numbers?

Institutional limits and political possibilities

The questions of mood and strategy that I am posing here are central to the dissertation research I undertook. A communal sense of frustration with the status quo of police terror and mass incarceration, menial jobs, dilapidated housing stock, and underperforming education systems, led me to take seriously the social justice agendas of the arts organizations I would work with. As a staff member at Junebug Productions, Inc., I became familiar with the institutional folklore surrounding its predecessor organization, the Free Southern Theater (FST). FST was conceived by the more artsy types working and struggling within the Civil Rights Movement. In the mid-1960s the Free Southern Theater articulated itself as an arts organization dedicated to building support for the Civil Rights Movement's social justice agenda. Junebug Productions and its Founding Artistic Director, John O'Neal would come to enjoy a central position

within New Orleans’ overlapping, contemporary arts and social justice constellations. As Junebug Productions had essentially inherited the Free Southern Theater’s philosophical as well as aesthetic foundations, one must begin with a social history of Civil Rights struggle in order to begin to understand the connection between Junebug’s attempt at a contemporary response to the questions I had frustratedly posed above.

This chapter intends to contextualize events like “Talkin’ Revolution” amongst the more contemporary intersections of art and activism in New Orleans. Rather than positing the post-Katrina moment as a wholly unique “state of exception” (Agamben 2005) to the status quo of the city’s socio-political structure and cultural fabric, this chapter – by surveying the local history of twentieth century struggles for racial equality – attempts to highlight not only the ruptures, but also the continuities within the landscape of Black-led, arts organizations and institutions articulating a social justice agenda. By providing historical context to today’s forms of activism, I aim to lay bare the structures of racialized oppression that limit the possibilities of grassroots social transformation.

In the preceding chapter, I discussed at length the “master narratives” that animate and inform very different understandings of historical events. I argued that presently cultural workers and social justice activists are engaged in the interpretation of historical events such that the master narratives about the South, about slavery, and about New Orleans’ racial exceptionalism are disrupted and decried. In this chapter, I aim to craft a narrative survey of Black-led organizing during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements and beyond. In so doing, I will challenge yet another master narrative which

seeks to interpret New Orleans as somehow racially exceptional given its rather bloodless transition from de jure segregation.

Historian Charles Payne, in the 2007 edition of his pioneering work *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, outlines what “Julian Bond calls the Master Narrative of the Civil Rights Movement.” He writes:

Traditionally, relationships between the races in the South were oppressive. Many Southerners were very prejudiced against Blacks. In 1954, the Supreme Court decided this was wrong. Inspired by the court, courageous Americans, Black and white, took protest to the street, in the form of sit-ins, bus boycotts, and Freedom Rides. The nonviolent protest movement, led by the brilliant and eloquent Reverend Martin Luther King, aided by a sympathetic federal government, most notably the Kennedy brothers and a born again Lyndon Johnson, was able to make America understand racial discrimination as a moral issue. Once Americans understood that discrimination was wrong, they quickly moved to remove racial prejudice and discrimination from American life, as evidenced by the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. Dr. King was tragically slain in 1968. Fortunately, by that time the country had been changed, changed for the better in some fundamental ways. The movement was a remarkable victory for all Americans. By the 1970s, Southern states where Blacks could not have voted ten years earlier were sending African Americans to Congress. Inexplicably, just as the civil rights victories were piling up, many Black Americans, under the banner of Black Power, turned their backs on American society (Payne 2007: xiii).

Drawing on the assumption of the “goodness” and morality of the white American mainstream to explain the decline of de jure segregation, Julian Bond’s “master narrative” constructs white people as the crucial agents of change. Moreover, the master narrative of the Civil Rights Movement cannot account for the persistence of white supremacist racial attitudes and inequities; notice there is no mention of the withering away of de facto discrimination. Julian Bond’s “master narrative” not only serves to present a sanitized version of the Civil Rights Movement in which moral white actors take center stage, this master narrative also finds itself lending credence to contemporary proclamations vis-a-vis the post-racial or post-Black moment. The theoretical projection that the U.S. has reached a new zenith in race relations usually rests on flimsy evidence. For example, polls about optimism, research on economic and social mobility, and data

about interracial marriage seem to buttress the claim that Obama's election signaled the declining significance of race or racism (Block 2010; Haq 2010; Wilson 1980).

However, most serious scholars agree that post-racialism is a "myth" or a "dream" (Ifill 2009; Wise 2009; Tesler 2010; Kaplan 2011; Parks 2011).

Touré, author of *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, asserts that post-racialism doesn't exist, while simultaneously asserting the veracity of post-Blackness (2011). His main theoretical contribution is to make the point that there neither are nor should be psychological, behavioral or any other type of parameters delimiting Black identity. But that's just about his most useful or relevant point. Touré's "post-Blackness," which takes for granted the successes wrought by the Civil Rights Movement, e.g. voting rights, anti-discrimination legislation, and equal access to public accommodations, is shot through with the privileges of U.S. citizenship and class status. Ultimately, post-racialism and post-Blackness only work in the upper echelons of society as a means of individualizing the Black experience. These myths effectively exclude from the national conversation, and occlude from national sight the very real ways in which race – and Blackness in particular – are targeted by a multitude of forms of structural violence.

Just as it is important to dispel potentially harmful myths like post-racialism or post-Blackness to get a more complex understanding of the continuing struggles of Black people, it is also important to step back from the contemporary moment and examine the myths and master narratives of the past. Clearly articulated from a Eurocentric and/or white supremacist standpoint, the above narrative is not the only "master."

Amongst pro-Black and left-leaning activists and intellectuals, another master narrative also exists to explain the historical events of the Civil Rights and Black Power

era. Scholars of the twentieth century Black American experience have theorized the Black freedom struggle as one “Long Movement” (Korstad and Lichtenstein 1988; Theoharis and Woodard 2003; Countryman 2005; Hall 2005; Self 2005). In this framework, the Civil Rights Movement is not distinct from other forms of protest movement; instead it exists as simply one manifestation of a long, protracted, and continuous struggle for Black Self-Determination. However, “the Long Movement framework, positing an unbroken chain of insurgency from the 1930s-1940s to the 1970s-1980s, falters when one considers the ruptures created by domestic anticommunist campaigns in the late 1940s and early 1950s, and the wide-ranging federal counterintelligence operations directed against militant Black activists in the late 1960s and early 1970s” (Cha-Jua and Lang 2007: 273). Because of these urgent and destabilizing forces, the Civil Rights and Black Power movements represent “successive waves of a broader Black Liberation movement, differentiated by strategy and tactics, organizations, leadership, membership, ideology, discourses, symbols and practices” (ibid 275).

Of course, the Civil Rights Era was informed by the many eras of struggle preceding it. Because this was a movement heavily engaged in thinking about the nature of/rights of Black citizenship, it carries along with it the ideals to which Black leaders and activists attempted to hold the American government. This becomes all the more obvious when one looks at the goals of many Reconstruction governments, Louisiana’s in particular: Laws were enacted banning segregated public accommodations. Similarly, the goals of the Civil Rights Movement were articulated as seeking an end to discrimination in public accommodations such as parks, buses, schools, and the like. In the Civil War

period, persons of African ancestry from all over the state generally, and from New Orleans more particularly, were able to organize, articulate, and mobilize around a set of claims to basic human and civil rights en masse. Indeed, varied forms of racial struggle and political protest were manifold in the Civil War period, and well into Reconstruction. In fact,

Antebellum and postbellum Negroes sought to improve their status by relying upon these strategies and techniques: (1) revolt; (2) escape to the nonslaveholding states in the North, or to Canada; (3) colonization in Africa, or in the Western Hemisphere; (4) emancipation; (5) enfranchisement; (6) calls for protective laws and a definitive statement of their status as free Negroes; (7) legal defense; (8) agitation; (9) pressure-group techniques; (10) education of various sorts; and (11) the formation of national and international organizations to promote racial advancement. None of these strategies seemed capable of neutralizing white opposition to full and complete equality for Negroes (Moore, Jr., 1981: 23).

Some of the forms of struggle and protest deployed in both the ante- and post- bellum periods were later reactivated in the early and mid-twentieth century struggles for civil rights, such as legal defense, agitation, pressure-group techniques, and the formation of national and international organizations to promote racial advancement. Both the NAACP and CORE would come to exemplify these strategies and tactics in New Orleans.

The McCarthy Era was truly reminiscent to the Reconstruction Era, fraught as it was with racial violence and political strife. The McCarthy Era preceded and overlapped with the Civil Rights Movement, and endured almost an entire decade longer in the South than in the rest of the U.S.; this era of race and red-baiting would set the stage for later social and political developments. And many of those people active in “the Movement” would become not only architects but also vocal critics of the contemporary social order. In many ways, the McCarthy Era and its reactionary culture of “Massive Resistance,” is an important nodal point in American history: it carries along with it the tradition of

white supremacist terrorism unleashed after Reconstruction, while it points to the culture of fear and militarization that would later develop in the post-9/11 moment. A close study of the models of activism and protest deployed by ordinary Black folks in the McCarthy Era and beyond would reveal much about the tactical errors, triumphs, and strategic visions for the future that are carried forward today. However, such a study is outside of my purview. This chapter will only briefly introduce some of the different forms of activism, organizing, and ideology within Black New Orleans during the late twentieth century.

That great tributary of resistance, the Civil Rights Movement

What has come to be known as the Civil Rights Movement was actually not a single “movement” at all so much as a collection of different, quite ideologically diverse initiatives and struggles, which aimed to achieve the political rights and legal protections of full citizenship for Black people living in the United States. What these initiatives and struggles held in common were the desire to reform the legal and political systems undergirding U.S. Civil society. “In political discourse, ‘civil rights’ refer to privileges the state grants its citizens and protections against unjustifiable infringement by either the state or private citizens [...] For African Americans, civil rights have connoted incorporation into the U.S. polity, as well as American civil society” (Cha-Jua and Lang 2007: 274). Attempting to join the U.S. polity took different forms in different cities and towns; for example, in Montgomery, AL in 1955 Black bus riders conducted a boycott of segregated public transportation; in Greensboro, NC in 1960 Black students conducted sit-ins at segregated lunch counters.

The infrastructure for the proto- Civil Rights Movement was established shortly after the turn of the twentieth century when W.E.B. DuBois and colleagues (white and Black) founded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). This historic event in Movement history is an important antecedent to the Civil Rights Movement because, although spawned by the Niagara movement which featured prominent Black leaders, the NAACP was not a wholly Black-led institution. The goal of the organization was “advancement,” thereby rejecting early proclamations of Black Nationalist sentiment and signaling the institutions’ reformist goal of one day joining the mainstream.

During the same, turn-of the-century, historical period, New York City philanthropists, social workers, and activists came together to found the National Urban League (NUL). The Urban League, much more so than the NAACP owes its existence to the settlement house movement of the Northeast and Midwest, in which philanthropists, social workers, and activists were principally concerned with the deplorable urban conditions to which (im)migrants were subjected. The object was to build settlement houses in poor urban neighborhoods and immigrant enclaves; these settlement houses would act as residential community centers housing middle-class social workers and activists who hoped to share their education and culture in efforts to assimilate the urban poor into proper citizens through programs designed to “uplift” them. While the National Urban League did not construct actual settlement houses in Black neighborhoods and communities, they did appoint committees tasked with addressing the issues of the lack of employment and education opportunities for Black people. The NAACP tended to use litigation as its *mode d’emploi* while the NUL tended to use philanthropy. In essence, the

NAACP and the NUL operated as the two sides to one coin – with the legal pursuit of full citizenship rights and the myriad forms of capital possessed by white robber barons and aristocrats behind the Black community, political disenfranchisement would be gradually, incrementally eroded.

Because the Movement was so diverse in its strategies, ideologies, and tactics, many of its participants had contrasting aims. For example, the example of Malcolm X's fiery rhetoric, exhorting Black people to think of themselves as a nation within a nation, proves that working for voting rights did not always equate to a whole-hearted endorsement of integration. Moreover, NAACP leader Robert F. Williams' treatise *Negroes with Guns* demonstrated that all civil rights activists were not proponents of an infinitely patient and pacifist worldview. Indeed, many in the Civil Rights Movement would be perceived as gradualists and reformers, most Civil Rights activists were responding to what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the fierce urgency of now" (1967); in fact, Historian Kim Lacy, in *Righteous Lives*, maps the different styles and approaches to leadership and social change that each generation or cohort of activists in New Orleans embodied from the 1950s to the 1970s. Rogers writes, "a common collective consciousness, historical understanding, and vision of necessary social change distinguish activist generation units from other temporally related groups that do not realize themselves in public action" (1993: 11). She gives the leaders of the 1950s the title of **integrationists**, **racial negotiators**, or **diplomats**. Exemplified by the NAACP and the Urban League, the style of leadership in New Orleans during this period was largely relegated to clandestine meetings and closed bi-racial committees made up of the white business elite, and prominent Black activists and professionals.

The next generation of leaders was dubbed the **political generation** because so many of them were able to parlay their activism on behalf of social change into political careers later on in life. For example Dutch Morial who was active in the NAACP Youth Council and became the apprentice to the late great A.P. Tureaud would become the first Black mayor of New Orleans. Many of the young professionals who sat in on the bi-racial committee meetings would later found political organizations aimed at creating a bloc vote for the city's Black working and middle classes; such organizations included the Black Organization for Leadership Development (BOLD), Southern Organization for United Leadership (SOUL), Community Organization for Urban Politics (COUP), and the Orleans Parish Progressive Voters' League (OPPVL). While some of these organizations borrowed membership from former activists and Race Men and Women, these were not groups whose foundations rested on the philosophy of social change or individual transformation the way that their predecessors had – namely SNCC and CORE.

Finally, Rogers talks about the **protest generation** who came of age as college students (some of whom left college to become activists) when they entered the movement. Although many from the protest generation began as college students, many were not and some were older; but what made the protest generation different was their in-your-face radicalism. Some of these leaders became Black nationalists, and/or Afrocentrists. In fact, many from the protest generation took a rather spiritual and moral approach to the movement and went into careers that lifted up the cultural and artistic expression of Africa and her Diaspora. Indeed, “in the 1970s and 1980s, the ‘CORE family’ of the 1960s would be an ongoing cultural force in New Orleans, but one that

largely renounced the political leadership in which they had been so intensely trained” (Rogers 1993: 111).

It is mostly the protest generation of activists with whom I had the pleasure of working and building relationships. Men like John O’Neal and Leon Waters and Malcolm Suber all were a part of the protest generation – some of them a part of the following generation of organizers – who went on to build institutions in which Black cultural practices, aesthetics, and politics all come to bear on the work of social change. In fact, these men and others would go on to establish non-profit organizations and/or community programming dedicated to radicalizing young people, as well as their poor and working class parents. John O’Neal would found Junebug Productions from the ashes of the Free Southern Theater, and Leon Waters and Malcolm Suber would work together to establish the Louisiana Museum of African American History, out of their involvement with the Afro-American Liberation League. Mama Dodie also can be counted as a part of the protest generation, having joined both the NAACP Youth Council and later CORE, and having seen the insides of more than a few jail cells in her time. Like many young people, she soon felt that she had outgrown the NAACP’s legalistic approach.



Figure 7: From Left to Right: John O’Neal, Dodie Smith-Simmons, and Malcolm Suber at “Talkin’ Revolution.”

The modern Civil Rights Movement prepared its leaders to engage in the work of cultural organizing by first training them to organize around straightforward goals. However, just because the goal of desegregation was straightforward in no way means that it was somehow more achievable at its outset, given the violence with which the organizers and movement leaders were confronted. Civil Rights organizations cohered around voting rights and public accommodations.

The political direction to which each “generation” or “cohort” of activists were oriented owes much to the legacy of the Niagara Movement which aimed to end racial discrimination, as well as to the Settlement House Movement which, animated by the missionary impulse, aimed to alleviate the poverty of, and uplift America’s newest and poorest citizens. Both of these social movements were heavily influenced by an ethic of Christian brotherhood, working and praying as they did to establish God’s kingdom here on Earth. It was the Niagara Movement as well as the Settlement House Movement that

precipitated the emergence of the NAACP and the NUL, institutions dedicated to not only reforming the legal and political disenfranchisement of poor and working-class men and women, but also reforming the cultural assumptions and social customs of the U.S. mainstream. Steeped as these movements were in Judeo-Christian rhetoric and symbolism, the Civil Rights Movement borrowed some of that language and accepted whole-heartedly the commitment to non-violence. Because of this central tenet, men like Robert F. Williams, President of the Monroe, NC chapter of the NAACP and author of the book *Negroes with Guns*, were in the minority as vocal advocates for armed self-defense.

These organizations laid the groundwork for the modern Civil Rights Movement. Both centralized power in their national headquarters, and chartered numerous local chapters in big cities and small towns alike. With explicitly progressive platforms and resources at their disposal, the NAACP and the NUL groomed respectable, middle-class male leadership. In Louisiana, the New Orleans chapter of the NAACP came to be one of its most active chapters in the South, let alone in the state itself. Drawing heavily from the community of aristocratic Creoles of Color for its membership, the New Orleans chapter provided an avenue through which male leaders could once again take up the mantle of a bygone era of republican romanticism. Whereas the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision effectively shut the door on overt Creole and Black political activism, the founding of the New Orleans chapter of the NAACP in 1915 re-opened the door, if only a sliver at first. The NUL established its New Orleans chapter in 1938, much later than its NAACP counterpart. By that time, the NAACP had already begun to draw nearer and nearer to the progressive labor politics of the CIO and other Left institutions. Avoiding

these types of political collaborations, the New Orleans NUL would come to play a role in the clandestine negotiations of desegregation during the modern Civil Rights Movement.

The Civil Rights Movement's 'old guard': the NAACP

The New Orleans Branch of the NAACP was established in 1915. The NAACP was slow-moving, and bureaucratic owing to its national, top-down structure. Historian Adam Fairclough writes, “the formal democracy of the NAACP, with its emphasis upon correct parliamentary procedure, discouraged mass involvement while encouraging internal ‘politicking’” (1995: 19). Because the organization did not employ fieldworkers, like SNCC and CORE did, it relied heavily on the groups and associations that were already extant in the Black communities of Louisiana. Some of these included “labor unions, Masonic organizations, insurance companies, newspapers, Catholic societies, and teachers’ associations” (ibid xvi). Originally culling its members from the ranks of the Black upper classes, the New Orleans NAACP was a small association of professional men, the majority of whom claimed Creole identities. Although Afro-Creoles had played a major and radical role during Reconstruction, historian Kim Lacy Rogers notes “Catholic Creoles participated in New Orleans’ NAACP [...] they were political moderates who favored negotiation over confrontation, and who deeply believed in an individualistic ethic of social mobility” (1993: 82). A.P. Tureaud, for whom there is street named in the 7th Ward, was one such Creole professional affiliated with the NAACP.

Alexander Pierre Tureaud, for example, joined the NAACP in 1922 and fought against racial discrimination for fifty years. The dean of civil rights lawyers in Louisiana -- and for a time the *only* black lawyer in the state -- his name appeared on virtually every suit filed by the NAACP: working with Thurgood Marshall, he integrated schools, universities, buses, parks, and public buildings; he won voting rights suits; he equalized the salaries of black teachers. In 1960 he represented students arrested in the sit-in movement, arguing the first such case to reach the Supreme Court (Fairclough 1995: xii).

However, Tureaud began his civil rights career as an insurance salesman – law was not his primary practice; he was unable to sustain himself as a lawyer because even amongst his professional peers the mindset that Black professionals were not as competent as their white counterparts prevailed. Quite rightly, “Tureaud seethed with indignation when the NAACP paid white lawyers generously and then expected blacks [sic] like himself to give their services for free or for next to nothing” (Fairclough 1995: 66). Because of a steadfast commitment to equality, Tureaud continued to work with his local chapter; and in 1939 when the NAACP Legal Defense Fund became its own separate wing of the NAACP, Tureaud worked closely with Thurgood Marshall devising legal strategies toward desegregation. And “while Tureaud was active in fighting police brutality across the state as the head of the Louisiana NAACP, he was also persistent in fighting police brutality at home. The files of the New Orleans and Louisiana branches of the NAACP are filled with hundreds, if not thousands, of police brutality complaints against the New Orleans Police Department” (Moore 2010: 11). Indeed, “Creoles like Tureaud had a consciousness of history and their place within it. Tureaud’s uncle served in the Reconstruction Legislature; his protégé and law partner, Ernest N. Morial, became the first black mayor of New Orleans” (Fairclough 1995: xiii).

After a protracted, two-year power struggle at the end of the 1930s, a group of so-called “young Turks” took over the leadership of the chapter. Nearly all of the men came from the working and middle classes. Fairclough remarks that “the leadership shift that

took place in New Orleans was closely linked to the explosion of labor militancy associated with the rise of the CIO” (1995: 50); “by 1941 the NAACP was showing signs of fresh vigor throughout Louisiana” (ibid loc. cit).

Because Jim Crow was so entrenched in the everyday lives of Southerners of all colors, and because anti-communist rhetoric labeled conscientious objectors as un-American “subversives,” “in the South of the 1940s *all* forms of activism entailed high risks: to organize a branch of the NAACP, file a lawsuit, or appear before the registrar of voters implied no lack of militancy” (ibid 99). At this time, the NAACP focused its energy and resources on voting rights. Occasionally, the New Orleans NAACP would organize protests, like the 1947 boycott of four Canal Street department stores which prohibited Black women from trying on hats (ibid 156). This was very different, however, from the boycotts which proclaimed “don’t buy where you can’t work.”

Anti-communist backlash in Louisiana decimated the Left; The Cold War was a furious conservative counterinsurgency akin to the post-Reconstruction wave of violence and racial terror. Foreshadowing today’s post-9/11 moment, “Southern racists, with the acquiescence of many liberals, harassed and silenced critics of white supremacy in the name of national security” (ibid 137). In response to the political climate of McCarthyism, the NAACP chose to distance itself from any communist-leaning language; as a result of purging its ranks of communists and their sympathizers to avoid further State persecution, the NAACP in essence abandoned any rhetoric of economic radicalism or anti-poverty; local “association stalwarts like A.P. Tureaud, Daniel Byrd, and Arthur Chapital were constantly on the alert for Communist ‘infiltration’” (ibid 143). Even the CIO, which had enjoyed a loose association with New Orleans NAACP leaders

in the 1930s and 1940s, chose to purge its “communist influences” and go along with the white supremacist mainstream after the 1954 *Brown* decision. Tellingly, when northern cities went up in flames as the disillusioned Black urban poor took to the streets, the NAACP found itself unable to address the situation at hand; having chosen not to organize around issues of class and exploitation, the NAACP had no connections whatsoever to the masses of Black people living at or below the poverty line: They had left this enormous group to struggle on their own.

During the 1940s and 1950s the NAACP in New Orleans – and nationally – followed a course in which they aimed to achieve equality as outlined in the doctrine of separate but equal. In 1952 New Orleans City Park was desegregated, thanks in large part to A.P. Tureaud and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund; however, although Black people had now gained the right to admission, the Superintendent of City Park rather vaguely warned that “there is a possibility of racial conflict where the two races gather together in large numbers on public property wherein it has not been the practice before” (ibid 111). Equalization of public accommodations and housing culminated in the openings of the “Black-only” Lincoln Beach on the lakefront and the Ponchartrain Park residential subdivision in Gentilly.

In response, at a two-day lawyers’ conference in New York, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund decided to commence a frontal attack on segregation. Henceforth, instead of seeking to realize the “equal” part of the “separate but equal” doctrine, it would sue for “the admission of blacks [sic] into all facilities, regardless of their racial designation. The goal was no longer equalization but integration – to overturn the *Plessy* decision that had controlled the law and helped shape southern society for

more than half a century” (ibid 153). This emphasis on wholesale integration was evident in the way in which the New Orleans NAACP responded to police brutality: the demand for more Black police officers and integrated patrol cars. As early as 1955, three Black women joined the NOPD in hopes of offering Black women a measure of protection against white male police officers. The hope was that by joining the NOPD Black women “would be able to safeguard [other] black women from abuse, sexual exploitation, and rape from white officers, and they would be able to handle the cases of black women accused of sexual offenses” (Moore 2010: 36). Under the leadership of A.P. Tureaud and Arthur Chapital, the New Orleans NAACP filed countless complaints against the NOPD, but did not broach the subject with the city’s white business elite behind the closed doors of the bi-racial committee, which met in secret to discuss the details of the desegregation process. Historian Leonard Moore insightfully observes:

While the local NAACP was active in the anti-brutality movement at times, their actions reveal a reluctance to take on the police brutality issue. As one of the largest chapters in the country, their refusal to take more drastic action toward the NOPD meant that the black community did not present a unified front in the battle for police protection. Whenever complaints arose about an incident of police brutality, the NAACP generally sent a letter to city officials requesting an investigation, knowing that the investigation would rarely result in disciplinary action, an indictment, or a conviction. Anti-brutality activists needed the credibility, resources, and organizational ability of the NAACP but they did not get it (2010: 62).

Due in large part to the scouring of communists and purported communist sympathizers from the NAACP membership rolls, “by the mid-1950s the burst of grassroots energy released by the enormous expansion of its membership during the war was clearly on the wane, despite the fillip of the *Brown* decision” (Fairclough 1995: 189). In 1956 when the Louisiana Supreme Court all but outlawed the NAACP for refusing to publicize its membership lists, the organization suffered a decisive blow. In order to keep afloat, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund officially separated from the NAACP, “a

situation that enhanced the power of the latter at the expense of the former” (ibid 298); and “by 1960 the ultra segregationists had so weakened the NAACP that only federal pressure and black determination prevented a complete stalemate in the battle for civil rights” (ibid 196). That year the New Orleans branch shut its doors for a short period, while cautiously encouraging shadow organizations and peer associations to continue to press on.

While the NAACP did not reach its former size or glory for some decades, organizations like CORE and indigenous Voter’s Leagues – although despised as contentious rivals by the national headquarters – did much to keep the struggle alive, such that when these organizations disbanded the NAACP was able to capitalize on the fertile ground they had cultivated. In the final analysis, these types of organizations were really quite complementary, as the NAACP was often at the forefront of civil litigation, while CORE and other localized groups and associations did the work of radicalizing the community and boosting morale through demonstrations, boycotts and protests; “at the local level, most NAACP members viewed CORE as a welcome ally. There were tensions and rivalries, to be sure, but the two organizations continued to cooperate under the auspices of the Coordinating Council” (ibid 283).

Of course the NAACP and the NUL were not the only Black-led organizations operating in and around New Orleans at the height of the modern Civil Rights Movement. So it would make sense that the NAACP and the NUL would work closely with like-minded groups and individuals. By the mid-1960s there were the Free Southern Theater (FST), the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC), the Orleans Parish Progressive Voters’ League (OPPVL), the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE), and the

Southern Conference Education Fund (SCEF) – a “subversive” civil rights organization led by white & Black men & women working to end segregation. In 1963, the SCEF offices in New Orleans were raided, as were the homes of the organization’s most prominent leaders. Indeed, the landscape of civil rights organizations was rich and varied, and any opposition to the status quo was dealt with as a lethal threat by whites both within and outside of the government.

In New Orleans, surprisingly, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) did not play a prominent role in the Civil Rights Movement. Comparatively speaking, the students in Baton Rouge were much more active and militant in supporting the movement. But New Orleans did have a very strong local chapter of CORE, which was headed by Oretha Castle, a student at Southern University and a worker at Hotel Dieu Hospital. CORE followed the same structure as the NAACP and the NUL: With their national headquarters in Chicago, CORE recruited mostly young people to their local chapters throughout the South. Field Secretaries supervised the actions and initiatives of each chapter and reported back to headquarters for counsel, advice, and resources. The SCLC on the other hand had been founded after a series of meetings following the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. On February 14, 1957 a follow-up meeting was held in New Orleans and the SCLC came into being, naming Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as its first President. Rather than recruiting leadership to populate local chapters, the SCLC chose to operate as an organization in which local churches and civic associations served as affiliate members.

Finally, the OPPVL was one Black-led civic association among many in New Orleans: “In the early twentieth century, neighborhood-influenced social clubs became

the primary source of black political organizations. The Autocrat Club, led by A.P. Tureaud, and the San Jacinto Club held sway over the Seventh Ward Civic League, the Federation of Civic Leagues, and the New Orleans NAACP” (Germany 2007: 248). While many of the neighborhood-based civic leagues and associations would eventually become defunct, the OPPVL would come to play a major supporting role in the Civil Rights Movement, helping to distribute materials, register potential voters, and organize civic campaigns. While each of these organizations was integral to organizing against Jim Crow, it was CORE that would completely reinvigorate the New Orleans movement.

The Civil Rights Movement’s ‘young Turks’: CORE

The New Orleans CORE chapter seemed to naturally grow out of the energy that young people brought to Civil Rights struggle. The Congress of Racial Equality was founded in 1942 in Chicago and its mission was to bring down Jim Crow through non-violent direct action. As a national organization it encountered some difficulty in setting up a chapter in New Orleans. However, taking its direction from local activists and the groups and associations they had already formed, CORE was eventually established and run by a cadre of New Orleans youth leaders. In fact,

The Consumers League of Greater New Orleans provided many students with their initial experience of direct action. Organized in the winter of 1959 with the goal of increasing black retail employment, it targeted stores in predominantly black neighborhoods, many of which refused to employ Negro checkout clerks. In April of 1960 the league launched a boycott of several white-owned establishments on Dryades Street, then a major shopping artery patronized almost exclusively by blacks [sic] (Fairclough 1995: 272).

The Consumers’ League’s “older leaders welcomed the participation of students from the black colleges in New Orleans, and the boycott and picketing became the seedbed for New Orleans’ CORE chapter” (Rogers 1993: 67). The young activists were so energized

by their involvement with the Consumers' League Boycott that "independently, Oretha Castle, Jerome Smith, Cecil Carter, Joyce Taylor, and Rudy Lombard decided to organize themselves into a group" (ibid 113). In the summer of 1960, some twenty students met with CORE field organizers at the Dryades YMCA to discuss forming a local chapter of CORE. In April of that same year, just months prior, SNCC was formed in North Carolina. "Although Louisiana would remain a predominantly 'CORE state' in the organizational geography of the black student movement, the leaders of New Orleans' CORE came to work closely with SNCC members in Alabama, Mississippi, and in other places" (ibid 124). Malcolm Suber, in the audience at the Talkin' Revolution event featuring Mrs. Dodie Smith-Simmons, asked her why she thought that the city ended up being a CORE stronghold and not an NAACP one. She made clear that it was because while CORE registered voters like the NAACP did, they also planned and coordinated direct-action tactics designed to integrate public transportation, public recreational facilities, university campuses and local businesses.

Although the NAACP was established as/by an interracial endeavor, members of the New Orleans chapter identified exclusively as either Black and/or Creole. On the other hand, CORE – also founded as an interracial endeavor – was more inclusive of white students and activists. This, however, by no means indicates that the New Orleans CORE chapter was a racially harmonious unit. On the contrary, in February of 1962 some 15 members of CORE were expelled, the majority of them white.

Recalling the row [which led to the expulsion of white members] years later, Oretha Castle [leader of the New Orleans chapter] put the matter more bluntly, asserting that white Tulane students had joined CORE with the primary aim of dating black women, having heard that "the CORE chapter was where you could come into contact with black women without any problems." That was not the kind of public image that CORE wished to project, Castle explained, and it was also uncomfortably redolent of the way in which white men had traditionally exploited black women for sexual gratification" (Fairclough 1995: 295).

Another perspective “regarded the purge of whites as a highly questionable maneuver by an entrenched old guard to retain control of the chapter” (Fairclough 1995: 296).

In many ways, CORE acted as the vanguard of civil rights struggle in New Orleans. For example “On September 9 [1960], seven CORE members held a sit-in at F. W. Woolworth’s on Canal Street. They were charged with ‘criminal mischief,’ held briefly in jail, and released after black congregations and the ACLU raised bail. The next day, the NAACP Youth Council picketed Woolworth’s to express sympathy with CORE” (Rogers 1993: 69). CORE protests offered a much-needed counterpoint to the NAACP’s and the NUL’s tactics of private meetings and restrained negotiations with the political and business elite of the city.

Historian Kim Lacy Rogers gives the private meetings of the bi-racial committee of Black and white businessmen and professionals in New Orleans an inordinate amount of credit for the desegregation of the city’s businesses and public facilities. However, Rogers does cite the “one aberrant break in the bi-racial control of municipal desegregation” (1993: 93) as happening on October 31, 1963: When CORE members accompanied by the Rev. Avery Alexander conducted a sit-in at the City Hall cafeteria, the police arrested them. “Officers carried Doris Jean Castle and Sondra Nixon from the cafeteria in chairs,” while Rev. Alexander was dragged up two flights of stairs by the ankles (ibid loc.cit). Historian Leonard Moore argues that Rev. Alexander’s arrest was a catalyzing moment, spurring more and more Black people to join the fight for liberation:

The arrest and handling of [Rev.] Alexander created a great deal of anger toward the NOPD from the black middle class and from white business leaders. A polished, respectable gentleman, [Rev.] Alexander was in no way a troublemaker or a rabble-rouser. The photos of his handling and arrest in the *Louisiana Weekly* served as a catalyst to get other black moderates and the black middle class involved in the struggle for freedom, as they correctly assumed that their status as “respectable Negroes” meant nothing in the eyes of the NOPD (Moore 2010: 53).

However, this event was not enough to get groups like the NAACP and CORE to incorporate the fight against police terrorism into their platforms. Rather, CORE's direct-action-oriented approach would continue to emphasize desegregation as well as voting rights.

Historian Adam Fairclough recognizes that "CORE's loose, decentralized structure also contributed to the dynamism of the New Orleans chapter. An action-oriented organization that encouraged local initiatives, CORE attracted young people who chafed under the aging, 'top-down' leadership of the NAACP" (1995: 279). The NAACP Youth Council, which was much more aligned with CORE than with the NAACP "came into constant conflict with the Adult chapter which sought to keep all public protests to a minimum. On the other hand, CORE activists had a cadre of lawyers – among them Mr. Lolis Elie Sr. – who came to their defense time and time again" (ibid 280).

At the Talkin' Revolution program, Mama Dodie Smith-Simmons talked about growing up in the 9th Ward and her involvement in the Civil Rights Movement in New Orleans; her experiences make clear the disconnect between the NAACP and CORE. At first she joined the NAACP youth chapter because her older sister had joined and told her about going to a juke joint with some other members after the meeting, but soon Mama Dodie realized that the NAACP was devoted to a strategy of political gradualism. Arthur Chapital, the branch president, told her that should she join or plan a sit-in, boycott, or picket to protest the segregationist practices of the major Canal street businesses and get arrested, she would not be bailed out. She then joined CORE which was an organization devoted to non-violent direct action (Smith-Simmons. "Talkin' Revolution," May, 12

2010). Apparently, “this relative freedom from legalistic restraint and adult supervision exercised great appeal for many young people, and CORE was able to recruit more than a few bored and frustrated members of the NAACP Youth Council” (Fairclough 1995: 280) like Mama Dodie and many others.

While young activists saw plenty of (direct) action, “of all the civil rights organizations, CORE was the one most committed to nonviolence as a method of social action: sit-ins, boycotts, picket lines, and marches were standard weapons in its arsenal. Sometimes depicted as an alternative strategy to voter registration, nonviolent direct action actually went hand-in-hand with voter registration” (ibid 321). In 1961, CORE launched its freedom rides campaign to desegregate interstate travel. Their campaign was fraught with naiveté on the part of the riders; they were hoping to encounter minimal violence while they worked to turn the tides of popular opinion against Jim Crow segregation. Their commitment to non-violence, however, was met with state-sanctioned terrorism. The Ku Klux Klan and local authorities collaborated, and even as far up the hierarchy of law enforcement as J. Edgar Hoover at the FBI knew and assented to the mob violence that met the freedom riders in the Deep South (Nelson 2011).

CORE’s commitment to non-violence came from its central philosophy of moral suasion; “at the time of the sit-ins, CORE believed that it effectively attacked the conscience of the country through direct action demonstrations – and that moderate whites would find their beliefs and attitudes changed by witnessing the undeserved suffering of the young actionists” (Rogers 1993: 119). This is where Julian Bond’s “master narrative” of the Civil Rights Movement gets its line about white people

recognizing segregation as being a moral issue; however, CORE's action-oriented approach, combined with NAACP's legalistic approach worked in tandem, and

the effects of direct action [...] were cumulative. As sit-ins and demonstrations spread across the South the fear of white retribution diminished correspondingly, and the scale and pace of the nonviolent insurrection in turn intensified. By the fall of 1963 demonstrations had become so commonplace that white supremacy lost the sense of "normality" that once persuaded blacks [sic] to reluctantly acquiesce in their own subordination (Fairclough 1995: 321).

Having become disillusioned with strict adherence to nonviolence in the face of white supremacist terrorism, CORE "abandoned integration, repudiated nonviolence, and rid their ranks of white people" (Fairclough 1995: 381). In light of their experiences working in rural towns which were often ruled by mob or Klan violence, "CORE workers soon discovered [...] that many ordinary blacks [sic] regarded strict nonviolence as nonsensical [...] guns were often seen as the *only* deterrent to white violence" (ibid 342). Mama Dodie, in fact, "thanked God for the Deacons' For Defense," a group of Black men that originated in Jonesboro, LA who protected movement workers, field organizers and laypeople from white supremacist terrorism (Smith-Simmons. "Talkin' Revolution," May, 12 2010).

By 1966 CORE had only 5 staff members in the state of Louisiana. In 1967 the Scholarship, Education, and Defense Fund split from CORE to become its own separate entity offering legal and political education and training; it never lost its commitment to interracialism the way that CORE did. But the impact of CORE's demise was mitigated by the NAACP's phoenix-like revival (Fairclough 1995: 384). Because CORE, and other organizations like it, had become more militant, "by 1965 [...] key [white] people of influence in the state finally admitted that black insurgency would not go away, and they preferred to deal with the NAACP rather than CORE" (ibid 408).

New Orleans CORE members, some of whom had returned from acting as fieldworkers in small towns throughout Louisiana and Mississippi,

emerged at once transformed and disillusioned. Most lost whatever faith they had possessed in electoral politics as a means of racial change. Many also rejected integration as a solution to the problems of black people. By the end of the mid-1960s, many worked for War on Poverty programs in New Orleans, and supported projects that promoted the distinctive contributions of black culture to the city (Rogers 1993: 126).

In 1964 CORE lawyer Carl Rachlin, along with the ACLU and members of the American Jewish Congress formed the Lawyers' Constitutional Defense Committee (LCDC). The LCDC was conceived of by Lolis Elie Sr. and his partners who were continuously overwhelmed with work on behalf of CORE and other activists. Having been provided something of a reprieve,

Collins, Douglas, and Elie organized the Southern Organization for United Leadership (SOUL) in 1965, which soon became the dominant black political organization in New Orleans. SOUL was based on the black homeowners and middle-income and lower-middle class blacks [sic] of the Lower Ninth Ward. In 1969, Collins led a group of black professionals to organize the Community Organization for Urban Politics (COUP), based in the Seventh Ward, traditionally the home of Catholic Creoles. Both SOUL and COUP actively ran candidates in the middle and late 1960s, and were instrumental in producing the black vote for the 1970 election of Moon Landrieu as the mayor of New Orleans (Rogers 1993: 108).

The growing militancy of CORE, and the emergence of new Black political organizations like SOUL and COUP signal that 1965 seemed to be the year that Black Power ideology began to make its impact in New Orleans. The Free Southern Theater (FST) was unique among the organizations populating the Movement landscape. Although founded as a theater and writing workshop at Tougaloo University in the Fall of 1963, the Free Southern Theater would move from rural Mississippi to New Orleans in 1965. Being that the organization was primarily an artistic one, FST made education, consciousness-raising, and movement-building central tenets. Proclaiming their purpose the FST wrote:

Through theater, we think to open a new area of protest ... one that permits the growth of and self-knowledge of a Negro audience, one that supplements the present struggle for freedom. ... we feel that the theater will add a necessary dimension to the current Civil Rights Movement through its unique value as a means of education ... stimulate thought

and a new awareness among Negroes in the deep South, ... work toward the establishment of permanent stock and repertory companies, with mobile touring units, in major population centers throughout the South, staging plays that reflect the struggles of the American Negro.

Our fundamental objective is to stimulate creative and reflective thought among Negroes in Mississippi and other Southern states by the establishment of a legitimate theater, thereby providing the opportunity in the theater and the associated art forms. We theorize that within the Southern situation a theatrical form and style can be developed that is as unique to the Negro people as the origin of blues and jazz. A combination of art and social awareness can evolve into plays written for a Negro audience, which relate to the problems within the Negro himself, and within the Negro community (O'Neal, Derby and Moses 1963).

Concerned as the newly-established institution was with the development of an organic Black aesthetic, the FST would dance on the shoreline between two successive waves: Civil Rights and Black Power.

A 'Great Awakening': the post-Civil Rights era and the rise of Black Power

Black Power has been characterized largely by its emphasis on psychology and culture. Organizations like the Nation of Islam (NOI) and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) created new Black cultures using theology and politics respectively; but although their means differed, the ends were the same: creation of a self-determining Black world which would deal with outsiders on the basis of equality not deference, stemming from a group power. Indeed, the principal goal of Black Power ideology was/is self-determination. In order to be self-determining, one must act in one's best interest; but because Black people have not been able to properly assess, let alone determine, their best interests without being the victim of physical violence, and spiritual and psychological attack, Black folks must begin to think and act freely. This is why Black Power places such emphasis on individual and collective consciousness.

From a Black Power perspective, coming into consciousness is analogous to a conversion experience. Stokely Carmichael, an outspoken proponent of Black Power, famously said “inside every Negro is a potential Black man” (Van Deburg 1992: 55). This emphasis on conversion to Black consciousness theorizes that key to achieving power amongst the oppressed Black masses is to create a new psychology and a new culture. A new, Black, culture is envisioned as a collective safe space in which Black men and women would be free to imagine, experiment, and play with new modes of thinking and being outside of the designated white supremacist norm.

Tracing the origins of the radical movements, Smethurst draws a direct genealogy from the CPUSA – and the Black people involved with or sympathetic to it – to the Black Power/Black Arts movements; this genealogy stands in opposition to much of the scholarship which sees the Black Power movement as an outgrowth of the Civil Rights Movement. Although the Black Power/Black Arts movements were heavily influenced by older artists, intellectuals, and activists and their understandings of progressive politics in general and Marxism-Leninism and socialism more specifically, Smethurst emphatically asserts that the Black Arts/Black Power movements did not cohere around a particular theoretical framework. Without any real center of ideological or gravitational pull, these movements were comprised of a plethora of nationalist interpretations. The movements were engaged in debate around the issue of nationalism in its manifold forms; there existed economic nationalism – a sort of Garveyite brand of Black capitalism, cultural nationalism – most notably the Afrocentrism of Maulana Karenga and the US Organization, revolutionary nationalism of the sort proposed by Kwame Turé, and so many other forms and interpretations.

However, while noting the relative decentralization, and occasionally the disunity, of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, the common thread between nearly all the groups was a belief that African Americans were a people, a nation, entitled to (needing, really) self-determination of its own destiny. While notions of what that self-determination might consist (and of what forms it might take) varied, these groups shared the sense that without such power, African Americans as a people and as individuals would remain oppressed and exploited second-class (or non-) citizens in the United States (Smethurst 2005: 15).

Scholars of the Black Power Movement often argue that Black Arts and Black Power are essentially two sides of the same coin (Van Deburg 1992; Smethurst 2005; Joseph 2009). In many instances, the individuals and groups who were at the forefront of one (Black Power, say) were also heavily involved with the other (Black Arts); for example, a person might travel to a city to attend a political gathering, and while there put on a poetry reading or facilitate a writing workshop or mount a theatre production. “Black Power and Black Arts circuits were often the same, not just ideologically, but practically” (Smethurst 2005: 14-15), which is why the Black Arts and Black Power movements were both local and national at the same time. Historian James Smethurst pegs the beginning of a southern Black Arts movement at the founding of the Free Southern Theater. He writes

A plausible beginning for the Black Arts movement in the South, and an example of the complexities and contradictions of radical black cultural interchange between North and South, can be pegged to the birth of the FST in 1963 under the auspices of CORE and SNCC (Smethurst 2005: 345).

The FST was concerned with creating work which would support the movement-building activities of Civil Rights workers and student activists. However, as an arts organization, the FST would attempt to support the movement through the development of an authentic Black artistic praxis.

The troupe also seriously committed itself to promoting a truly southern African American theater, attempting to develop a new repertoire, new actors, new playwrights, new directors, and so on through a number of workshops. Yet a persistent topic of discussion during the group’s history was how to attract and retain high-quality, formally trained African American theater workers (almost necessarily from outside the region) rather than relying on local actors, playwrights, and stage managers that the workshop

itself trained. The move of the theater from Tougaloo College to New Orleans highlights this contradiction, since to a large extent it represented the triumph of professionalism over activism (Smethurst 2005: 346-7).

The FST's first play, *Purlie Victorious* – “a satiric farce drawing on the southern black trickster tradition” (Smethurst 2005: 346) – was a conversion story written by Ossie Davis, in which the central character wins his manhood as he transforms from accommodationist to militant Black nationalist. The FST “also regularly presented new, avant-garde black poetry as part of its performing program, especially after 1965” (ibid loc.cit). Rarely, however, was the poetry (or any of the programming for that matter) authored by local New Orleanians or Black southerners; rather, the FST set out to serve “as a sort of conduit bringing ‘metropolitan’ art to local people from somewhere else, be it New York, Chicago, or San Francisco” (ibid 364).

Although the FST may not have had as strong a presence in shaping the local theater scene in New Orleans initially, its extensive national touring “inspired sympathetic artists (or aspiring artists) to emulate them and to stay in touch” (ibid 92), thereby helping to create a national community in which ideology and aesthetics were debated and experimented with. The lack of rootedness in New Orleans, may have stemmed from the fact that “in other cities, such older artists as Margaret Burroughs, John O. Killens, Langston Hughes, and Dudley Randall took it upon themselves to remind younger political and cultural activists of their predecessors even as they supported the Black Arts and Black Power movements. In New Orleans, older artists were often less forthcoming” (ibid 348).

“When the professional touring portion of the theater suspended operations in 1967 due to the loss of funding, the [writing] workshops came to the fore of the group” (ibid 349). With a more pointed focus and a larger group of workshop participants, in

1968 the FST began to publish the literary journal *Nkombo* (the West-African word from which the term “gumbo” derives). While the workshops and the journal served to ground the FST in local artist-activist communities, the workshops also became a hotbed of ideological and aesthetic discussion. Shortly after the publication of *Nkombo*’s first issue in 1968, a critical mass of FST supporters broke ranks and established their own collective known as BLKARTSOUTH. Artist-activist Kalamu Ya Salaam – who would come to be one of BLKARTSOUTH’s most prominent members – writes: “Due to an argument between John O’Neal, one of the FST founders, and some of us from the workshop, BLKARTSOUTH split off on its own” (Salaam 2011).

A defining characteristic of the southern Black Arts movement, particularly in New Orleans, was its militant anti-careerism as well as its commitment to building local institutions which promoted everyday Southerners and created a lasting arts infrastructure throughout the South. However, “one of the challenges the Black Arts movement in New Orleans faced was how to put forward a notion of blackness and African American nationhood in the face of the New Orleans myth” (ibid 360) of racial fluidity and exceptionalism.

The uprisings [which characterized the “long, hot summers” in 1960s America] provoked an avalanche of federal and local public money as well as private foundation support for nationalist black art and artistic institutions closely linked to revolutionary political movements. As Norman Jordan, Jerry Ward, and others have argued, this grant money sometimes had the effect of reining in radical cultural initiatives and draining initially militant institutions and annual events of their political content. This support often resulted in a depoliticized arts bureaucracy that undermined or straitjacketed the Black Arts movement, much like the “black regime” that Adolph Reed has posited as the result of post-Black Power urban politics, leaving the basic power arrangements of the United States in place (Smethurst 2005: 370)

Indeed, post- Civil Rights and post-Black Power urban politics did not fundamentally alter the white power structure, and New Orleans was certainly no exception.

Dissipating movements and the ‘new’ Black politics

By the time Moon Landrieu was sworn into office as Mayor in 1970, the political climate and the culture of Black activism had greatly changed from the days when he sat in the State Legislature. As a young State Representative, Landrieu had earned himself a reputation for his liberalism, having “voted against every one of the twenty-nine segregationist bills proposed in the first special session of 1960” (Fairclough 1995: 257), bills which were especially designed to stave off the integration of New Orleans public schools. Both historians Fairclough and Lacy agree that the election of Moon Landrieu was a watershed moment for New Orleans politics. And it was largely thanks to the political organizing of groups like SOUL, COUP, BOLD, and the OPPVL that Moon Landrieu was able to win office. New Orleans historian, Arnold Hirsch (1992) argues that SOUL, and COUP were two sides of the same political coin: one confrontational, the other conciliatory, both entrenched in the political system of white patronage. Tellingly, these organizations were established as their founders set their sights on political office.

Historian Adam Fairclough adds

The election of “Moon” Landrieu as mayor with only a minority of the white vote ushered in a new political era, one in which blacks [sic] were partners rather than clients, participants rather than passive spectators. Owing his success to solid black support, Landrieu ended the white near monopoly of City Hall jobs by making a large number of black appointments. Under Mayor Victor Schiro, City Hall had been virtually “lily-white,” with no black [sic] holding a position higher than that of clerk. Landrieu placed blacks [sic] in charge of city departments, selected a black executive assistant, and appointed a black chief administrative officer (1995: 427).

Furthering his reputation as a liberal politician and a racial progressive,

During his two terms as mayor, Landrieu deliberately brought blacks [sic] into the political system. He increased the percentage of blacks [sic] serving in city government from 10 percent to 40 percent. Blacks and whites [sic] believed that he had rewarded blacks [sic] for their support by giving the control of the community action and model cities program of the War on Poverty to black political organizations. His success set the stage for the developments of the late 1970s and 1980s -- the dominance of black political organizations and their candidates in city politics (Rogers 1993: 109).

While some argue that he was indeed a progressive, Moon Landrieu, enjoying wide support from the alphabet soup of local Black politics, was not so much a political or racial radical, but more an astute opportunist and politician, who, with the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, saw the electoral writing on the wall. With white flight to the neighboring Parishes, New Orleans became a majority Black city for the first time in a century. Landrieu's strategy of promoting Black "leaders" within his administration, and of directing lucrative contracts and grant monies to Black-led businesses and non-profits stemmed the tide of Black protest. Rather than owing his administration's victory to the power of Black (electoral) unity, "the Black political community remained fragmented, held together by the centripetal pull of its major white benefactor" (Hirsch 1992: 301). In the end, Black New Orleans' political capital remained largely squandered, although a plethora of political organizations had emerged in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement. And "in dealing with Black New Orleans, the practice of traditional politics meant the creation of a patronage network in which rewards were doled out in the established manner – the servings were larger and more regular, but the ladle remained in white hands" (ibid 297).

Moon Landrieu's aggressive incorporation of Black people into the New Orleans political machine only compounded the problem of splintering Black unity as the Civil Rights Movement waned and the era drew to a close; now Black leaders and activists could no longer point to a clear and obvious culprit for their oppression as had been the case with the injustices of Jim Crow segregation and *de jure* exclusion from the political process. Although Black men were being incorporated into the system of political patronage in impressive numbers, and Black women were becoming over-represented in

public education and civil service positions, the masses of Black people in 1970s New Orleans remained poor and disenfranchised as wages stagnated and living conditions in the city worsened. White flight left the city smaller and with significantly fewer tax revenues as working and middle class residents unwilling to accept desegregation moved to the surrounding Jefferson, St. Tammany, and St. Bernard Parishes. Although Black Power had been picked up by Black activists in New Orleans as early as 1965, the decade of the 1970s would see a rise in Black militancy both locally and nationally.

“By 1968, a group on the West coast, has now become popularly known -- starting in 1963. By 1968, in this part of the country [Deep South] and in the whole country, a group calling themselves the Black Panther Party is like electrified [sic] people, especially youth, as a serious organization willing to stand up against the white man with the gun to fight to the death... Growing up here [in New Orleans], where you had the NAACP, which is really an organization fighting everything legally -- you gonna go to the enemy's court, try to get justice and fight in his court, by his rules. History teaches you can't win at his rules. Congress of Racial Equality [CORE] which is really about trying to get reforms through picketing; ended up becoming a group that blacks [sic] and white liberals can explore the love relationships, I'll put it. You had a lot of that going on... getting away from real political struggle, even in SNCC... It seemed to appear there's an organization that's cropping up all across the country that is willing and will fight with the gun to fight this man. That was like an amazing development for people my age at that time [late teens, early twenties] because there wasn't someone here or a little group here that was like damn, we got a all-USA black group that's talking about going to war with this beast. At that stage in history the Black Muslims had in their 10-point platform, they called for a separate state. Elijah Muhammed had in his original platform that black people should have a separate republic, their own independent republic. They would get away from that later on with the assassination of Malcolm X, and today Farrakhan doesn't even say anything about that. But that's a powerful, revolutionary statement that we gonna split from you and form our own damn country, independent of you” (Leon Waters. Personal communication, January 22, 2011).

The story of Mark Essex is one such parable about the ways in which the Black Panthers were “electrifying” the youth. Mark Essex was a navy veteran who had grown up in a lilly-white town in the Midwest. After surviving the white supremacist brutality of the military regime in California, Essex moved to New Orleans. In the early 1970s, Essex became politicized after he witnessed the so-called “Showdown in Desire,” in which New Orleans police riddled the Black Panther headquarters with rounds upon

rounds of bullets after they refused eviction from their Lower 9th Ward home. Mike

Davis writes of Essex's own armed exploits:

A young Black navy veteran with almost no formal weapons training, Essex boldly attacked the headquarters of the New Orleans Police Department on New Year's Eve, 1972. After killing a black police cadet and wounding a white lieutenant, Essex escaped to a nearby warehouse where he ambushed a K-9 unit and killed another cop. For a week he eluded a vast manhunt before suddenly reappearing in the Howard Johnson Hotel across the street from City Hall. Going floor to floor, always warning the housekeepers to flee, he shot down hotel managers and white guests, setting rooms afire as he climbed toward the roof (Davis 2013).

Eventually, after a two-day stand-off, the NOPD brought in the assistance of the FBI and

mowed Essex down as they fired from on board a helicopter. Immediately after Mark

Essex was brought down by NOPD fire on the rooftop of Howard Johnson in 1973 the

States-Item

ran a front page story on four so-called militant black groups that were operating in New Orleans and under FBI and Secret Service surveillance. The groups were Republic of New Afrika; New Orleans Guerilla Group; National Committee to Combat Fascism; and the Maitryean Temple... As tensions remained high, local civil rights leaders were asked to condemn the shootings directly and black militancy in general (Moore 2010: 109).

Of course, the Black Panther Party was not the only organized, militant group in New

Orleans during the height of the Black Power era; however, it took Mark Essex's extreme

tactics for the white mainstream to take notice of the fundamentally different worldview

and life chances of their Black counterparts. Both the showdown in Desire and the

shootout on top of the Howard Johnson hotel succeeded in stirring up a hysterical racial

fear amongst whites. Law and order would become major issues for white voters, and

crime would become a growing concern. Conversely, heavy-handed responses to white

fear would cause a rise in anti-police protest.

In the immediate post-Essex period, a group of African Americans in the city decided to take the law into their own hands to enforce the law, to stop police brutality, and to fight crime. The Soul Patrol, under the leadership of Eddie Sims, was a group of young Ninth Ward residents who were committed to keeping the streets safe even if it meant beating up other black residents (Moore 2010: 113).

In 1972, Mayor Landrieu introduces a new NOPD unit, the Felony Action Squad (FAS), vowing to take on the city's rising crime rates.

Noticeably absent during the debate on the controversial new police unit [Felony Action Squad, or FAS, which was given a shoot to kill mandate in preventing crime or apprehending suspects in late 1972] were members of COUP, SOUL, the Black Organization for Leadership Development (BOLD), and the New Orleans Urban League (NOUL). The NAACP voiced its displeasure, but it was no longer a major player in local politics after the new black political organizations siphoned off prospective members. Their silence during the debate was predictable for two reasons. First, like many members of the black middle class, they were in favor of legislation that would stop crime in the black community. Second, there were closely tied to the Landrieu administration and its multimillion-dollar antipoverty program. They were unwilling to cross him on the potentially divisive issue of police brutality and jeopardize their access to the city largesse (Moore 90-91).

Perhaps because the issues of crime and police violence received such major publicity during the Landrieu Administration, in 1978 New Orleans elects its first Black mayor. Of course, he wasn't Black per se, but a Creole of Color. Having been groomed by prominent men in the Black and Creole communities, Ernest "Dutch" Morial was a lawyer, and once leader of the New Orleans branch NAACP.

Morial had an impressive resume. But his dark horse candidacy was not greeted with unanimous applause in black political circles. Most notably, although the Southern Organization for United Leadership (SOUL), the Community Organization for Urban Politics (COUP), and the Orleans Parish Progressive Voters League (OPPVL) considered themselves black political organizations, Morial's candidacy threatened their strategic plan. When SOUL refused to support Johnny Jackson's state representative race in 1972 in favor of a white candidate, and when both SOUL and COUP supported a white candidate with money for a judgeship in favor of a more qualified black candidate, Morial and others were convinced that SOUL and COUP were sellouts. As brokers of the black vote, SOUL, COUP, and the OPPVL could only maximize their potential when a particular candidate needed their support. Then, they could exchange black votes for money and patronage (Moore 2010: 141).

When he assumed office in 1978, A.P. Turead's protégé, Dutch Morial, "inherited a city with severe financial problems" (Rogers 1993: 164). The city he inherited also had suffered from a severe problem with racialized police terror. For instance, in that same year the Committee for Accountable Police (CAP) was founded. Activist Bill Rouselle would lead CAP in

arranging and facilitating town hall and community meetings in which civilians were able to air their grievances with the NOPD [...] Speaking at a town hall meeting at the Treme Community Center, CAP leaders read a list of demands regarding police brutality: (1) immediately removal [sic] of sixteen officers; (2) remove the IAD [Internal Affairs Department comprised of NOPD officers and administrators] from the jurisdiction of the NOPD; (3) implement a citizens review committee; (4) support a policy that required officers to “call in the time and location of an arrest”; (5) stop “pedestrian identification checks,” which were akin to those found in South Africa; and (6) explain his [the police chief’s] decentralization plan to the black community (Moore 2010: 151).

In late December of 1980, at the White League Monument, the Police Brutality Committee (PBC) headed by Kalamu Ya Salaam and the Afro American Liberation League headed by Malcolm Suber announced a boycott of Canal Street businesses to publicize and dramatize the issue of police brutality not only to the masses of holiday shoppers, but also to the city’s indifferent business elite.

While the Police Brutality Committee continued its selective buying campaign, it came under attack as a communist-front organization. Matt Miller of the Citizen’s Committee on Crime and Communism distributed leaflets, arguing that the PBC “is doing the work of communists.” Miller argued that the Canal Street boycott and other efforts of the PBC were laying the foundation for a communist takeover, “whether they know it or not.” Miller went on to state that “in every country that falls to communism, agitators have destroyed the effectiveness of the local police by accusing the police of brutality, and because of this demanding a civilian review board” (Moore 2010: 176).

Amidst escalating police terrorism and dedicated anti-police activism, Morial would win an easy re-election victory; the city’s voting base was now majority Black due in large part to white flight. During the 1980s, much of the federal support that Landrieu had previously been able to use aggressively to solve city problems had been axed by a Republican Federal Administration. Mayor Morial had tried unsuccessfully to levy property taxes within New Orleans to raise revenue, and had been defeated by the city council at each attempt. Much of the white support that had sent him into office in 1978 had evaporated by the election of 1982, when he was elected with an overwhelming Black turnout. Many of Mayor Morial’s former white backers found him “abrasive” while in office; and even Landrieu endorsed Morial’s white opponent in 1982. Morial

himself felt that he had been held to a different standard than had previous mayors because he was Black (Hirsch 1992). He also believed that his political opponents had controlled the press, which, in turn, presented a distorted view of his administration to the public (Rogers 1993).

Conclusion

An examination of the struggle to obtain civil rights, to build a sense of Black Power, and to create a liberating Black arts praxis in New Orleans during the latter half of the twentieth century, provides an ample foundation for understanding the limits and possibilities of Black organizing in the present, post-Katrina moment. As has been shown, the limits placed on Black freedom struggle were both external and internal. Some of the externally-placed limits included state surveillance and violence in the forms of McCarthyism and COINTELPRO spurred on by a hysterical white fear of retaliatory Black violence and of racial contamination. Some of the more internally-derived limits included movement fatigue brought about by Black disillusionment with the integrationist project. New possibilities in movement building were opened up as activists began to emphasize the role of art as well as the role of intra-racial organizing.

There were many organizations both local and national in scope that worked together to realize strategic goals. The more prominent Civil Rights organizations active in New Orleans included the NAACP and CORE. Upon closer examination of the organizations, the NAACP and CORE faced challenges that were indicative of the overall mood and direction of the movement: for example, Mama Dodie and others felt that the NAACP's legalistic approach was too slow-moving and bureaucratic. Mr. Waters and

others steered clear of CORE because they saw it as an organization in which interracial love relationships were explored. Both organizations, however, made it their goal to desegregate public accommodations, and to ensure Black voting rights. Some civil rights organizations were short-sighted in their goals, as in the political organizations which refused to back viable Black candidates in favor of white politicians they assumed would win e.g. SOUL, COUP, BOLD.

By providing a brief survey of New Orleans' Black-led social movement landscape, I have attempted to disrupt the popular understanding and master narrative of Black freedom struggle; additionally, I have demonstrated the ways in which myth has served to hide the essential violence which upholds, supports, and maintains the present white supremacist, capitalist, heteropatriarchal status quo. Indeed, the political gains of the Civil Rights Movement were not fully capitalized upon, and the nationalism of the Black Power movement was misunderstood and violently "neutralized." The violent state response to these movements belies the "master narrative" of Civil Rights; anti-communist and COINTELPRO surveillance and terrorism almost single-handedly destroyed networks that had been painstakingly cultivated by artists and activists alike. A former member of the NOPD Intelligence Unit offers some interesting insights about the surveillance and infiltration of the Black Panther Party in particular: firstly, he says "we got better results when we paid someone [to infiltrate the group] than when we motivated them with fear and intimidation" (Arend 2009: 36), confirming my hypothesis that the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal status quo is upheld willingly by individuals of any color who stand to benefit from her willing participation. Secondly, he remarks that "the Panthers were easy to infiltrate because there did a lot of recruiting"

(ibid 33); and, finally, the retired officer reveals “that I could get more information from the groups if I infiltrated them with women rather than men” (ibid 36). His observations serve as an ominous warning to those attempting to resuscitate the legacy of the Black Power and Black Arts movements.

Because of the success of surveillance and infiltration programs in neutralizing organizations and individuals perceived to be threats, over time anti-police activism became more and more central in New Orleans. It is particularly important to make note of the ways in which law and order and crime were conceptualized among both white and Black people because these perceptions had a lot to do with the ease with which ideologies and organizations were made obsolete. In a climate where these words and concepts were both politicized and racialized, it seems fitting that newer iterations of Black activism would turn to art and culture as a means for racial uplift. Free Southern Theater would serve as an important frame of reference for cultural workers and organizers in New Orleans.

Contemporary constellations of movement and money, actors and activists

I first met Mr. John O’Neal at my grandfather Owen Brooks’ 80th birthday party in Jackson, Mississippi in the late Fall of 2008. Many of the party attendees were self-identified “veterans,” both Black and white, of the Civil Rights movement. Some were men of the cloth, Baptists, Methodists, and Episcopalians; others were secular humanists. Some of the veterans had gone on to become prominent local politicians in and around Jackson, while still others were teachers, school administrators, organizers and artists. It was the first time I had been to Mississippi, even though my grandfather had been living in the Mississippi Delta since 1965. I’m not sure of what I was expecting to see, but I remember driving down a residential main drag in Jackson, noticing the absence of sidewalks or street lights, the dilapidated housing stock, and the overall blight. Did Katrina or Rita make it this far inland? I wondered.



Figure 8: ‘Movement Veterans’ celebrating Owen Brooks’ 80th birthday. Owen Brooks seated; John O’Neal standing far right.

My grandfather, at 36, had moved down South from Boston, Massachusetts to more fully join “the movement” – having just narrowly missed the killings during

Freedom Summer the year before. Working with Delta Ministries, and based in Cleveland, Mississippi, my grandfather met a young Mr. O’Neal who had joined the movement as a field organizer for SNCC. While my grandfather is a gruff and no-nonsense type, Mr. O’Neal is a charming and loquacious man – a real people person. A loyal friend for over 40 years, Mr. O’Neal had driven 3.5 hours from New Orleans to Jackson to celebrate my grandfather’s life and their shared commitment to struggle.

I had just finished a summer’s worth of exploratory research in New Orleans. My mother, familiar as she was with “John” – as she called him endearingly – grabbed my arm and rushed me over to him as he served himself some birthday cake. She was excited to introduce me to Mr. O’Neal; he greeted me enthusiastically, and gave me his cell phone number. I did not know it, but Mr. O’Neal would become my most important interlocutor and vouchsafe in New Orleans, introducing me to countless individuals and groups, and helping me to navigate the dense and interconnected landscape of personal and professional relationships. Mr. O’Neal’s theater company, Junebug Productions, Inc. (JPI) was a critical entry point into the world of community-based, Black-led nonprofits, articulating social justice-oriented missions. Junebug certainly held a place of honor among artist-activists in the city, because of its historical ties to the Free Southern Theater (FST); as a co-founder of FST, Mr. O’Neal, in particular, enjoyed his position as revered community elder.

This chapter explores the history of the Free Southern Theater as well as that of the more recent company, Junebug Productions. Sharing Mr. O’Neal as their “guiding light,” both the FST and JPI can be viewed as constellations: beautiful and dynamic amalgamations of interacting people, aesthetics, and ideals. By mapping and examining

these constellations, we can see how the historical moment of their creation has shifted over time; and we can see how New Orleanians have responded to the challenges of community building and organizing through artistic expression. Illuminating the more hidden dynamics of interplay between and amongst these constellations, I also aim to dispel some of the myths around the social justice NGO landscape and why it is that the movement seems to have been neutralized, stalled or pushed underground.

Art and activism: a reciprocal relation?

The founding proposition of this chapter and of this study more generally, is that the arts in post-Katrina New Orleans are a critical site of politicized struggle within which disparate visions of the city compete. Monuments and murals often serve as the entry points for considerations of the contradictions and complexities of art as it relates to its manifold publics (Harrington 2004; Kramer 1994; Miles 1997; Senie 1992). But so, too, are other forms of artistic expression, theater among them. Given that theater is a participatory project, it lends itself easily as a medium of artistic *and* political expression. As such, theater has been a medium historically tied to political and social movements. Realizing drama's revolutionary potential, the architects of the Russian Revolution and the rapidly expanding Soviet Union invented Agitprop Theater to suit political and economic imperatives. Designed to agitate and propagandize, Agitprop Theater attempted to educate audiences about important policies and events in hopes of inspiring viewers to join the Communist cause.

Preceding the more nuanced political and artistic aims of Social Realism, agitprop “actors usually represented stock character types, such as noble workers, corrupt capitalists, and evil wreckers, usually without extensive character development. The messages were simple-work harder, learn the factory rules, give up the church, and donate money to the state. Many of these works were improvised on the spot” (Mally 2003: 325). Due to the ephemeral nature of agitprop, prone as it was to follow local and national political whims, this form of theater relied heavily on improvisation. Agitprop theater would be epitomized in the “living newspaper” in which headlines and stories taken from the newspaper were improvisationally re-enacted for popular audiences. While this form of theater did much to support social movements worldwide, agitprop – and the theater itself – is merely a public forum. Indeed, “the theater can never cause social change. It can articulate pressure towards one, help people celebrate their strengths and maybe build their self-confidence [...] above all, it can be the way people find their voice, their solidarity and their collective determination” (McGrath 1991: xxvii).

Agitprop did much to popularize the production as well as the consumption of theater, in the Soviet Union and abroad. At the same time, in the U.S. so-called “community” theatre developed out of the Little Theatre Movement in the early twentieth century as an alternative to the Victorian-styled commercial theatre, which produced opulent, melodramatic spectacles for a largely aristocratic and/or upper-class audience. What has come to be known as community theatre is simply theatre which defines its audience and/or cast and crew as being members of a particular community. For example, this might be defined based on geography, race, or affinity. The theatre which grew out of the Black Arts Movement essentially defines its community in terms of race,

class, and geography (Dent et.al 1969; Fabre 1983; Elam 2000; Reed 2005; Smethurst 2005). Similarly, “applied” theatre tends to take place outside of the locations usually designated for theatre “with participants who may or may not be skilled in theatre arts and to audiences who have a vested interest in the issue taken up by the performance or are members of the community addressed by the performance” (Prendergrast and Saxton 2009: 6).

As global geopolitics continued to transform throughout the twentieth century, agitprop evolved into a more refined social realist aesthetic, which could be utilized in “community” and “applied” theater projects. Artists, academics and intellectuals working for, or sympathetic to, the global aims of the revolutionary Communist Party began to popularize social realism, thereby blurring the social worlds of professionals, artists, intellectuals, workers, and revolutionaries. David Schlossman, argues that the social worlds of actors and activists tend to overlap as they attempt to transcend the limitations imposed by what he calls “institutional” theater, i.e. mainstream commercial theater. For example, he writes, “when activists incorporate a costume, puppet, or die-in within an action without remarking upon it, the event constitutes a component of cultural performance; when activists use the same type of device and *call it theater*, they articulate exchange (albeit indirect exchange) with performance as an institutional practice” (Schlossman 2002: 90).

Augusto Boal is perhaps most famous for encouraging the overlap of social worlds within the realm of theater; his *Theatre of the Oppressed* ([1979] 2000), outlined a wholly new use for, and way of making theatre in which professionalism and spectatorship are de-emphasized in order to maximize full social participation. Like

Freireian pedagogy, Boal's method attempts to use theatre as the dialogic mode through which oppressed peoples come to recognize their oppressions as socially constructed and therefore susceptible to deconstruction and re-imagination. For the participant in Boal's model of theatre "both individual, concrete experiences and collective, cultural knowledge are forced to interplay" (Schutzman and Cohen-Cruz 1994: 152).

Because this chapter is concerned with social relationships and cultural (re)production, not only will I discuss the FST and JPI, their aesthetic philosophies, as well as their social and political contexts for working within communities; but also I will attend to the social dynamics of the relationships between and amongst actors working within the bounds of the FST contemporary constellations. By giving a detailed production history, I aim to demystify the "perfection" staged by the company. A discussion of the composition and conflicts taking place behind the scenes makes clear the ways in which theatrical production is specifically linked to the socio-political and economic realities of the post-Katrina historical moment.

The Free Southern Theater and John O'Neal have had a lasting legacy in New Orleans, spurring community-based activism in ways that the NAACP, Urban League, SNCC and CORE were not able to sustain. Because older models of organizing did not value the process so much as the product and did not incorporate art and aesthetics into their activism, FST emerged within the Civil Rights Movement to fill that void. FST aptly chose New Orleans as its home base, rich as it is with culture and artistic expression. Bringing together the different African-based traditions of public congregation, FST was able to engage in the work of cultural organizing, whereby they

used the stage as a consciousness-raising forum in which to galvanize people behind the efforts of the Civil Rights Movement.

In this day and age, activist Tufara Waller-Muhammad defines cultural organizing as the strategic use of art and culture to move policy (Personal communication, February 18, 2011). Waller-Muhammad cites Black people and other people of color as experts in this form of organizing because it is more holistic, and because “we’ve never had the luxury of creating art for arts’ sake” (ibid); for Black folks, Waller-Muhammad notes that the very term “cultural organizing” is redundant because “we organize from a standpoint of collectivity and improvisation which is inherent in our culture” (ibid loc.cit). Given this definition, cultural organizing demonstrates a tradition of performativity within and dramatization of struggle through the uses of music, poetry, and theater. In this regard, cultural organizing grows directly out of – and yet simultaneously also informs – twentieth century Black social movements such as the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power/ Black Arts Movement with their emphases on not only instrumentalizing culture for the sake of the movement, but also creating a radical/revolutionary movement out of the raw materials of Black culture.

In this chapter, I will argue that Mr. O’Neal and the organizational constellations which revolve around him have been integral in shaping a sense of community for artist-activists in New Orleans, as well as in shaping the processes and products of social justice activism within this community. I will trace the history of the FST and its transformation into Junebug Productions so that I might bring into focus the ways in which cultural organizing takes place among a small, interracial community of artist-activists in post-Katrina New Orleans. In so doing, I will also highlight some of the

possibilities that this form of activism has opened up, as well as some of the limitations that challenge the urgent task of building community.

The Free Southern Theater

In 1963, a group of SNCC members – the more self-proclaimed, artsy-types – introduced a theater workshop on Tougaloo’s campus near Jackson, Mississippi. This workshop was called the “Free Southern Theater.” Many contemporary theater arts organizations in New Orleans can trace their inspiration, aesthetics, or choice of content back to the Free Southern Theater. This is the case for theater companies that are predominantly white as well as predominantly Black; Black and white thespians alike are quick to cite founding member John O’Neal as a great and charismatic influence on their artistic and political choices. John O’Neal narrates the conditions that led him and his comrades to establish the Free Southern Theater at Tougaloo:

Here we are in 1963 with all this stuff swirling around, all these great and powerful ideas as well as some dramatic bullshit swirling around. And I remember '57 which is just passed the Montgomery Bus Boycott, feeling for the first time that we *can* do something. We stayed organized -- we, I'm claiming something I never did nothing to. But we *can* stay organized; if they did it in Montgomery -- walked for almost 2 years, collaborated in getting their own little taxicab system and ferry system getting people to and from the places they had to go *for free*, people didn't pay for that. Sometimes people would say "here take this dollar; take this 50 cents, it's all I got now, brother, but take it." And suddenly it became *possible*. I'm sure I'm not the only one who had that feeling of *Jesus, we can do this*. So it was that sense of "we can do it" that led to the freedom rides. The sit-ins first. A little simple gesture: "we gone sit here until it's right." And the actions of those kids across those campuses, for those 2 summers between school terms. 1961 was the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Most people who came to get involved came only with the idea that they gon' spend 2 to 3 months, *weeks* even. And I was surprised to discover that, cuz it was clear that you couldn't do much in 2 or 3 weeks, I was planning to spend 3 or 4 *years*, 5 maybe at the outset, but then i was going to New York to start my theater career [laughs]. And I didn't care no nothing about New York theater, I saw it and said "naw, this is not the right horse to be ridin' here." Theater of the absurd was properly named. It was absurd to give that kind of work serious attention. Just absurd. But it's where society was registered. At any rate... after it became clear that 5 years wasn't gonna be enough -- which took maybe 3 or 4 months to figure out -- that we were talking about a lifetime, then that meant do I give up these values and this

perspective and go to New York, and join the madness? Or do I stay with my values and stay working in SNCC?

And that's when Doris [Derby] said at 4 o'clock one morning after we'd had over -- Gilbert [Moses] and I shared an apartment at the time -- we'd already been thinking about the Free Southern Theater but we didn't have a *plan*. About 3 o'clock in the morning in our smoke-filled apartment -- we were both smoking cigarettes at that time, I don't know how Doris stood it -- but she said "well, why don't we start a theater? If theater means anything, anywhere, it certainly should mean something here." The air in the room was filled with smoke and passionate statements about art. But that stopped the conversation. The smoke seemed to settle. Silence fell over the conversation. We looked from one to the other: why not? [Laughs]. 'Cause *everything* seemed possible! We had the Freedom Labor Union, we had the Freedom Democratic Party, we had all kinds of *freedom* organizations doing things within COFO or statewide in the Council of Federated Organizations in Mississippi. *Cause everything was possible*. So we're gonna have a Free. Southern. Theater. [Laughs] It gave purpose and direction to our thinking. We still spent a lot of time thinking, and *opining* and talking instead of doing something but -- one of Tennessee Williams' leading ladies for his plays in the '50s and early '60s got word of what we were doing and came South on her own expense, on her own volition and was looking for us to find out what are you guys *doing*? I wanna help. Well, we were talking! [Laughs] We talked a lot. I remember Peter Rome was her driver and friend, he was a theater person of some sort but I don't remember what he did. She'd sit there listening to our conversations and she said: "Well, you guys are talking a lot, what are you *doing*?" -- "We're talking, thinking this thing through. Tryna get it right." She said: "Theater's about producing and presenting plays. What will you *do*?" One more moment of silence that was provoked by a woman who was audacious enough to say so. Well, it seems right. [Laughs] What *shall* we do? That's when we decided to do *In White America*.

[...] The Movement was clearly, in my opinion, the most important thing that's happening in the world at the time. Because it represented the possibility of progressive change in the most powerful nation in the world at the time. And because it represented the effort on the part of African American people to transform *their own* circumstances. That made it really important. I'm thinking how can this be? How can we build on this? And so all of this comes together with the idea of a Free Southern Theater. We didn't even have one argument about what the name of this effort was gonna be. Cuz after that first conversation with Doris it was clear: Free. Southern. Theater. Couldn't do any better (Personal Communication, October 11, 2011).

From a simple workshop, the FST grew to become one of many cultural manifestations of the '60's Movement, and a hub of the Southern Black Arts Movement. Historian James Smethurst writes, "A plausible beginning for the Black Arts movement in the South, and an example of the complexities and contradictions of radical black cultural interchange between North and South, can be pegged to the birth of the FST in 1963 under the auspices of CORE and SNCC" (Smethurst 2005: 345). Having emerged from within the budding Black Student and Civil Rights movements, the FST operated from the premise that art and politics were complementary, not opposing terms. This

orientation made artistic and cultural production a much more accessible and relevant task for ordinary people who had no prior theater training or background.

The troupe also seriously committed itself to promoting a truly southern African American theater, attempting to develop a new repertoire, new actors, new playwrights, new directors, and so on through a number of workshops. Yet a persistent topic of discussion during the group's history was how to attract and retain high-quality, formally trained African American theater workers (almost necessarily from outside the region) rather than relying on local actors, playwrights, and stage managers that the workshop itself trained. The move of the theater from Tougaloo College to New Orleans highlights this contradiction, since to a large extent it represented the triumph of professionalism over activism (Smethurst 2005: 346-7).

Founding members, John O'Neal, Gilbert Moses and Doris Derby took their small ensemble and criss-crossed the South staging theatrical productions in places that had not before been exposed to formal theater, its mores and etiquette. In 1964 and 1965, it toured communities throughout the Deep South, playing before black audiences. The first play the FST staged was *In White America*. Written by Martin Duberman, a white, New York liberal, the two-act play is an epic which takes place in the Antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction eras. A "documentary" play, *In White America* artfully weaves a complex tapestry of African American life using historical documents as well as monologue and dialogue. The company's second play, *Purlie Victorious* – "a satiric farce drawing on the southern black trickster tradition" (Smethurst 2005: 346) – was a conversion story written by Black Arts movement supporter, and prolific artist, Ossie Davis, in which the central character wins his manhood as he transforms from accommodationist to militant Black nationalist. With this play the FST attempted to communicate its politics, while creating an aesthetic, blending agitprop techniques with Black popular culture. The play would also foreshadow the FST's own shift in racial ideology as well.

FST's theorizing about blurring the social worlds and conventional practices of theater and activism had not quite yielded an altogether new praxis on stage. Yet the FST was, indeed, tied to the Civil Rights Movement, and its tactics of non-violent direct action: "When four members of the Free Southern Theater, three blacks and a white [sic], entered a French Quarter bar in the spring of 1965 they were arrested for vagrancy" (Fairclough 1995: 340). Forging a new direction for the company thereafter, the FST "also regularly presented new, avant-garde black poetry as part of its performing program, especially after 1965" (ibid loc.cit). Rarely, however, was the poetry – or any of the programming for that matter – authored by local New Orleanians or Black southerners; rather, the FST set out to serve "as a sort of conduit bringing 'metropolitan' art to local people from somewhere else, be it New York, Chicago, or San Francisco" (ibid 364).

When the FST moved its base from Mississippi to New Orleans in 1965, it brought to the city not only a professional touring company, but also a commitment to making theater relevant and instrumental to the life of the community. In New Orleans, FST "offered training workshops in theater and writing to the New Orleans community, and stimulated ongoing theater and literary projects in the community through the 1970s and 1980s. As the civil rights movement waned after 1966, the theater became more completely a New Orleans troupe" (Rogers 1993: 187). In so doing, the group would disavow its interracial beginnings and become an all-Black company, staging exclusively Black-authored material. Once the dust settled, FST emerged as the first community theater in the South (Rogers 1993: 187).

FST as a self-proclaimed community theatre company sought, by introducing formal theatre where it had not been, to contribute to the growth and expansion of social and cultural capital by developing performance, administrative, and professional skills, aesthetic appreciation and the like. Although the FST may not have had as strong a presence in shaping the local theater scene in New Orleans as some would have hoped, its extensive national touring “inspired sympathetic artists (or aspiring artists) to emulate them and to stay in touch” (Smethurst 2005: 92), thereby helping to create a national community in which ideology and aesthetics were improvised, debated, and, at times, modified.

But the contradiction remained: FST would be a community theater that produced theater for the community, not necessarily by it. Articulating with global social movement trends and ideologies, “the accent from the early to mid-seventies was on theatre to the people [...] Where it tried to break away from the confines of closed walls and curtains of a formal theatre building into rural and urban community halls, the assumption was still that theatre was to be taken to the people. People were given a taste of the treasures of the theatre. People had no traditions of theatre” (Wa Thiong’o 1994: 41).

Founding member Doris Derby was unwilling to participate in FST’s “triumph of professionalism.” Mr. O’Neal describes the circumstances which led to her ouster:

But what I feel like I failed to do was get my colleagues, Gilbert in particular, ultimately we were not able to engage the question of paternalism and patriarchy. Couldn’t see through it cuz we were bound up in it so entirely. So we figured Doris’ role would be the secretary. [Laughs] And so she said ‘to hell with that, I’m gone!’ (Personal Communication, October 11, 2011).

Dr. Derby surely must have felt uncomfortable with the established order of things as they related to gender in the struggle for Black liberation. Mr. O’Neal and his colleague

Gilbert Moses insisted that Dr. Derby take up the conventional role of “organizer” – one who handles administrative tasks, and creates or maintains relationships and networks – while they claimed for themselves the role of “leader” and took it upon themselves to make public pronouncements about the role of art in political engagement and activism, and negotiated with potential funders and strategic allies. This gendered dynamic has been documented not only in the rural South (Payne 1993; Robnett 1996; Brooks 2008), but also in the urban North (Drake and Cayton 1945), and perhaps this gendered dynamic was at the root of why the FST struggled to nurture and cultivate a New Orleans-based theater with its own innovative practices and aesthetics. Ultimately, it would seem as though the Black men who attempted to emulate white standards and codes of conduct failed to meet the goal they had set at the organizational outset: to create something which would be to theater what jazz is to music (John O’Neal. Personal communication, October 11, 2011).

With Ms. Derby gone, FST was dominated by its charismatic male leaders, who struggled to create an aesthetic to which the majority of Black working people could relate. In so doing, FST drew from the art world as much as the realm of politics.

Founding member, John O’Neal reminisces

the ruling dialogue in this part of the South, and in the country at that time, was a dialogue about nationalism, Black Nationalism on the one hand of the type that Malcolm [X] represented, and a kind of Revolutionary Socialism -- there were several diverse Marxist trends at that time. The one that sort of dominated was the Communist Party of the United States of America, which had been associated with support for the Russian Revolution -- *after* the Russian Revolution. Before that Americans are distinguished by their opportunistic ideas: they’ll take, they’ll jump on the winning team. Yeah they wanna be on the winning team. It’s sorta sad, because there’s a great potential for strength in the American working class, but it’s hard. People are corrupted by money. You know, they want *money*. And they don’t have an analysis of what’s going on in the world and what the true source of power is in society and whether it’s something that can indeed accrue to one person. It can’t. It has to go through a movement. Cuz otherwise the basis for democratic equity, which is a core value, is lost (Personal Communication, October 11, 2011).

In its heyday, Free Southern Theater not only toured nationally, but also broadcast a weekly, hour-long television program called *Nation Time*. The Black Nationalist thrust of the *Nation Time* program was truly indicative of the ideological shift taking place within Black-led organizations across the country. Having been a member of SNCC, John O’Neal was well aware of their 1966 Position Paper on Black Power in which the students wrote: “Black people cannot relate to SNCC because of its unrealistic, nonracial atmosphere; denying their experiences of America as a racist society” (Van Deburg 1997: 122). Mr. O’Neal remembers that the show aired on “Channel 12. And we lost the show about the latter part of ’74. We had run it, I guess, a couple years by now. By this time, Nationalism had emerged as a major strand, perhaps because of Malcolm’s impact and the Nation of Islam. But it was the Arab oil crisis, first Arab Oil Crisis that got us kicked off channel 12. Cuz we did a program about the oil crisis, and it became clear that we were critical of the policies of the United States that Big Oil had adopted” (Personal Communication, October 11, 2011). In reality, this episode was the straw that broke the camel’s back, as FST had already been getting into trouble with the local authorities:

In 1973 PANO [Patrolmen’s Association of New Orleans, an all-white police organization] reacted angrily against a \$15,000 grant the city council gave the Free Southern Theater, a black arts organization they labeled anti-police and un-American. At a press conference called by PANO head Irvin Magri, Jr., he stated that the theater was responsible for “actions, policies, copyrighted poems, and short stories that clearly advocate the killing of citizens and police officers.” Magri then went on to argue that the source of the funds came from the general fund of the city, which was customarily used to pay police and fire overtime. In response to Magri’s grandstanding, BOP President Larry Williams praised “the action of the New Orleans city council in awarding the funds” to the theater (Moore 2010: 116-117).

In the eyes of the white power structure, FST posed a threat because it carried the potential to galvanize the poor Black masses of the city around a political platform that demanded an end to white supremacist capitalism and its attendant political violence and police terror. Certainly, it was unwise for the ruling elite to allow these types of

messages to be broadcast. “As you may appreciate, I’ve always looked at the work of the theater to be generative. So the measure is not how much we own, but how much we inspire other people to do. So it’s about inspiring engagement, analysis and thinking. And that television program was a good thing” (O’Neal. Personal Communication, October 11, 2011).

By the late 70s, the Black Power Movement was stymied by the confluence of a number of forces, the largest of which was infiltration by the FBI’s COINTELPRO. Being critically dependent on a dissipating movement for its access to audiences and resources, the Free Southern Theater finally dissolved in 1980. From the ashes of the FST, Junebug Productions, Inc. (JPI) emerged as its organizational successor; the organization took its name from “Junebug Jabbo Jones” a character created by members of SNCC to represent and symbolize the wit and wisdom of common folk. JPI’s mission statement makes clear its commitment to continue the work begun by the FST and acknowledges that art and politics are complementary, not opposing, terms.

In the broader view, FST was a much-needed outlet for the Black artists with whom the organization worked most closely. For young Black women and men who were frustrated, alienated, and oppressed, FST gave them a public platform not only to air their grievances, but also to hone their crafts. On the flip side of the coin, FST cultivated an appreciation for and access to the theater for Black people across the U.S. South, exposing them – many for the first time – to new forms of cultural capital. FST also played a major role in raising the consciousness of the people who would comprise its main audience: Black working people. In Freirian fashion, FST’s productions and community activities were aimed at 1) posing problems with the status quo, and 2)

imaginatively presenting solutions to said problems. Coupling theatrical attempts at audience development and consciousness-raising, with post-production dialogue – and sometimes also voter registration, FST provided social occasions for reflective thought as well as tools for collective political engagement. What FST did not do, was to cultivate a wholly new industry with its own unique aesthetic and labor practices, its own etiquette and mores, and its own celebrities and stars. Ultimately, however, FST was generative, catalyzing the founding of bar room theater troupes, a literary journal, and influencing the aesthetic choices and political orientations of countless institutions both locally and nationally.

Junebug Productions, Inc.

After about a month of carlessness and immobility, I had finally gotten a set of wheels on Halloween weekend of 2009; I decided to call Mr. O’Neal and see if he was at home so that I could stop by to say hello. When I called he was at the grocery store and on his way to the Frederick Douglass High School on St. Claude Avenue in the 9th ward to co-teach a theater class full of young folks. He invited me to stop by anytime after 5:15pm. Nervous and excited at the same time, I went and met up with Mr. O’Neal at his theater class at Douglass High School. I had a hard time finding the back room in which the class was meeting: It was in a trailer behind the school building. Even in the Fall of 2009, this majority Black public High School was still using trailers and modules while awaiting the completion of repairs for Katrina-related damage.

When I got there it was a mostly Black group with a few white folks, and two brown/Asian young women. Most of the class was taken up talking about issues of race and in/visibility. The conversation felt pedestrian, devoid of nuance and complexity; but I stuck it out and participated dutifully – as any anthropologist worth her salt must. The last activity we did after positioning ourselves along a Black/white gradient and performing stories about in/visibility was a free-write in which we were to describe the concept of race to a 6 year old child. Most people wrote about how race is “make believe” or how it is a bad thing, divisive, evil. The model of race that seemed to be at work in the discussion taking place was race as social construction. The conversation seemed a little disingenuous to me. I wondered what good would it do for a 6 year old to know that race is make believe if she’s falling victim to real-life racial violence? How might social science arm or fortify a 6 year olds’ precious and tender sense of self? These were the larger questions I was hoping to get at before the class was over.

Most folks seemed to agree that race is not biologically determined, but rather socially determined based on physiological and cultural traits. I asked how we could possibly explain race as a value free or even beneficial concept – I mean, why are there people who are proud of their race if it’s such a bad thing? That got the ball rolling. But after about 15 minutes of discussion the class abruptly ended. The abrupt ending to the discussion after it seemed like we were finally getting somewhere – and not simply repeating the latest social science had to offer on the subject – would foreshadow what I felt was Junebug’s tendency to pay lip service to the Civil Rights Movement as well as popular anti-racist, social justice rhetoric without doing the work of contemporary outreach and movement building.

I didn't know it at the time, but I had just witnessed the keystone program of the Free Southern Theater Institute (FSTI), the educational arm of Junebug Productions, Inc. which sought to institutionalize the Free Southern Theaters' values and aesthetics. The class, "From Community to Stage," was taught by JPI staffer, Kiyoko McCrae, a woman of mixed Japanese and white American heritage who identifies as a woman of color, having grown up primarily in Tokyo. McCrae, a singer, writer, and director, was in charge of developing a theater course which incorporated a critical understanding of race, the Junebug aesthetic, theater vocabulary, and performance techniques. That's a lot of material to be handled in one 12-week course. But McCrae had taught the course three times already. All along she had raised the question of her non-Blackness to the staff at Junebug, but, of necessity, she remained the organization's primary liaison to "the community": In addition to teaching the course, McCrae actively cultivated relationships with local teaching artists and recruited students. Mr. O'Neal occasionally joined the class as a co-teacher mostly when it got to the section of the syllabus that dealt with the Free Southern Theater, the Civil Rights Movement, or the Junebug aesthetic.

Maybe 10 in number, the students taking the course this time around were primarily young Black professionals in their 20s and 30s, with a penchant for performance. These were the "young folks" Mr. O'Neal had mentioned. I was a bit taken aback, as I was expecting, given the location, to be greeted by a class full of High School students. A few 20-something, new-to-townners, were enrolled in the class: the "transplants" as the newbies are derogatorily called, were Black, white and Asian, a truly diverse and representative group. One or two of the white participants were students at Tulane University who had signed up to take the class for credit through the Theater and

Dance Department. The Fall 2009 cohort was by far the most successful of all those that had taken the “From Community to Stage” course. Their production, “Voices from the Back of the Class,” played to a mixed audience and was nearly sold-out at each showing.

“Voices from the Back of the Class” was a play that followed the experiences of teachers, students and administrators all entwined in the New Orleans Public School System. The narrative line followed what seemed like a day in the life of a struggling public school, but also seemed to encompass the outside-of-school daily life that was informed by individual and group experiences with notions of race, class, gender, sexuality, survival and achievement. The play interspersed spoken word poetry and monologues throughout, and in the scripted dialogues and ensemble scenes, attempted to deal frankly with issues of race and class in public education after Katrina. As more than a few of the course participants were teachers in the New Orleans Public Schools, many of the vignettes and monologues were taken directly from their professional experiences.

A 20-something Asian young woman who came to town with Teach for America performed a series of monologues in which she sat at a desk writing in her diary about her desire to “make a difference,” the lack of guidance and support from her supervisors and Teach for America liaisons, and the harsh realities at home which affected her students’ in-class behavior and achievement. A man and woman, both Black, both in their 30s performed spoken word pieces in which they examined in poignant detail the ways in which their gendered racial oppressions informed the attitudes they took as young people toward school, teachers and the education system. The young woman talked about the threat of sexual violence and its role in making her feel voiceless,

victimized, and ashamed; the young man talked about the threat of state-sanctioned police violence and its role in making him feel emasculated, victimized, and powerless.

At the talkback after the show, facilitated by Mr. O’Neal’s daughter Wendi, audience members discussed their reactions to and identification with the characters’ onstage: frustrated public school students, well-intentioned teachers, results-driven school administrators. All in attendance agreed that the production should tour locally and be seen by as many teachers, administrators and students as possible. After so many iterations of the From Community to Stage course, the Fall 2009 cohort and their final production reinvigorated Junebug’s, and subsequently FSTI’s, mission and raised their respective profiles in the social justice and arts communities – or so it seemed.

Shortly after the show that I attended in November 2009, I began working with Junebug Productions, assisting the Managing Director with various administrative tasks and lending an ear to his many frustrations. Terry Scott was the second in command. He relocated to New Orleans from New York City after allegedly burning many bridges in the world of television and radio production. As the Managing Director it seemed that pretty much *everything* was his responsibility. But while he was charged with almost all of the administrative work, he was left very little authority to make artistic decisions – that being the sole dominion of Mr. O’Neal. This particular arrangement might have worked, had Terry 1) wanted nothing more than to draw up contracts, write grants, and manage budgets, or 2) been able to play to Mr. O’Neal’s performance as JPI’s absent-minded, yet strong-willed patriarch. Instead, the two men were constantly butting heads. In fact, the day that Mr. O’Neal had invited me to the class “From Community to Stage,” he asked me off-handedly if I knew how to manage a budget. He confided in me, “I just

don't think that our Managing Director *gets it*." Mr. O'Neal wondered aloud whether Terry, being a light-skinned Black man of New Orleans Creole descent *could*, in fact, get it, or whether his politics were destined to diverge so radically from his own. Terry, on the other hand, was proud of the fact that he refused to "drink the cool aid." By that Terry meant that he would continue to call out the absence of the Emperors' new clothes even while others obsequiously admired his royal threads. "It's a cult of personality," he would often say of Junebug and John O'Neal.

Although Terry and Mr. O'Neal both hailed from other regions of the U.S., as "transplants" they both claimed New Orleans as their own. Terry happily re-located to the sunny Southern clime, hoping to find his true, authentic self in the land of his parents' birth. His apartment was aptly located in the Treme neighborhood, famous for its Free People of Color and their architectural and cultural handiwork. He sought a sense of belonging living there. On the other hand, Mr. O'Neal's claim to New Orleans was not only based on the fact that he has lived here for over 30 years, but also on the fact that he raised his children here, and nurtured intimate relationships with the people of this city. Indeed, Mr. O'Neal helped to raise, inspire, and encourage many of New Orleans' children. And while Terry's roots are here in New Orleans, he no longer calls this place home. Mr. O'Neal, however, still remains. But perhaps the most salient difference between the two men is not their skin color, or their place-based claims of identity; it's their ideologies. The tensions, animosity, and ambivalence between Terry and Mr. O'Neal have everything to do with the places in which they came of age, the generations to which they belong, and the perceived political urgencies that characterized those distinct time periods.

Mr. O’Neal grew up in rural Illinois. As a college student, young Mr. O’Neal thought that nothing in the world was as important as what was going on amongst Black people yearning and fighting for their liberation. He tells me,

1961 was the birth of the modern Civil Rights Movement. Most people who came to get involved came only with the idea that they gone spend 2 to 3 months, *weeks* even. And I was surprised to discover that, cuz it was clear that you couldn’t do much in 2 or 3 weeks, I was planning to spend 3 or 4 *years*, 5 maybe at the outset, but then I was going to New York to start my theater career [laughs]. And I didn’t care no nothing about New York theater, I saw it and said “naw, this is not the right horse to be ridin here (Personal communication, October 11, 2011).

Instead of giving a few months to the Movement before heading off to start his theater career in New York, Mr. O’Neal gave his life *and* his career to the dictates of the modern Civil Rights Movement. He effectively came of age in the Deep South surviving incarceration, harassment, and humiliation. Knowing this about Mr. O’Neal helped me to understand why it seemed that he was *so* ready to leave Junebug Productions by the time I was hired on. His exhaustion was quite obvious. And yet he pressed on. Mr. O’Neal came from a time when the words oppression, exploitation, were not simply rhetorical devices or theoretical abstractions, they were bold, precise accusations of injustice that demanded immediate redress. Mr. O’Neal’s contemporary usage of such words indicated not only his politics but also his generation. His work with FST and later JPI sought to create an original aesthetic informed by the lived realities of oppressed and exploited African Americans in the Black Belt South; fittingly, he began with their stories.

Rather than interviewing folks to get access to material with which to create theater, Mr. O’Neal has helped to patent the story circle methodology. The Free Southern Theater often made use of the story circle methodology, and Mr. O’Neal built Junebug Productions on this methodological foundation. The story circle is quite literal. A group gathers, sits in a circle, and decides on a theme. One person starts the process by

telling a story; the story s/he tells must be her own story to tell (no voyeurism or plagiarizing allowed), and during the time that the story is being told (usually no more than 5 minutes depending on how many people are in the circle), no one is allowed to interrupt or ask questions. When explaining the process, Mr. O'Neal likes to say that "the story is born in the ear of the listener." That means you should not already have decided on a story to tell based on the theme alone; instead, you should focus on listening to the stories being told in the group, and when it's your turn you should let the story come to you. Once everyone has shared a story, that's when people can ask questions or talk about their interpretations/reactions/analysis of the stories they've heard. But the point is not confrontation, it's sharing. Mr. O'Neal put it best when he said: "When we tell stories we are sharing with each other how we put things together. When we share stories we share whole parts of ourselves. Stories come charged with the spirit of the teller and have lives of their own" (Flaherty 2010: 21).

Terry thinks the story circle is a bunch of bull. He can't stand the thought of sitting in a circle with touchy-feely types whose stories are usually innocuous and way too personal. Mostly Terry hates listening to people "whine" about race and racism, especially the white women that seem to follow Mr. O'Neal's every move, hang on his every word, and show up ready to prove themselves as anti-racist allies. Terry doesn't seem to have much patience for the stories that end in tears either. His perspective on the relevance and efficacy of the story circle methodology is at odds with Mr. O'Neal's because, having grown up and come of age with markedly different political urgencies, Terry has a much less "politically correct," and a much more no-nonsense approach to conversations about race and racism. Terry grew up in Los Angeles in a large Catholic

household. His parents didn't talk much about New Orleans, but, were, nonetheless, a part of the Creole émigré community. Everyone looked like him he said, the women that stopped by after church, and the men that helped his father with the home improvements. Terry remembers being teased as a child for his light skin – a classic tragic mulatto (or in this case the tragic, unknowing Creole) who was too white (looking at least) to be Black, and too Black (culturally and politically speaking) to be white. It's no wonder that Terry is quick to reject racial or cultural essentialism, and not a very good Black Nationalist.

Terry's relationship to racialized essentialisms is clearly informed also by the postmodern moment of the 1980s in which he came of age: He loves all things hybrid (cuisine, language, and women), ironic (humor and politics), and media and technology-related. Terry absolutely abhors traditionalism, and maintains a healthy skepticism of authority and convention. But then there's the fact that Terry spent the majority of his professional career in New York City, which gives him a sort of snide arrogance when it comes to the Southern way of doing things. Because Mr. O'Neal came of age personally and professionally in New Orleans in the 1960s, he is used to taking his time and cultivating relationships – relationships which he has drawn upon for moral as well as financial support over the years. Terry, on the other hand, is a skip-the-pleasantries type whose impatience often shows at the most inopportune times. His sarcastic humor makes him sound something like a character from an Ishmael Reed novel. Mr. O'Neal didn't seem to take very well to it.

As it turned out, the generational difference between Mr. O'Neal and Terry was a major hindrance to their working relationship. But the one between Mr. O'Neal and the students from the class "From Community to Stage" was even harder to overcome, as he

was unwilling to throw his institutional weight behind the newly formed ensemble. After their successful run of “Voices From the Back of the Class,” the participants elected to continue working together, to refine the play and perform it at various venues. With Kiyoko’s full support, the group named themselves VOIC’D – Voices Organized in Creative Dissent. As of November 1, 2011 the mission statement on the VOIC’D wordpress website reads as follows:

We are a multi-racial, anti-racist collective of artists, writers, educators, and activists who are interested in examining how the many institutions that have educated us have shaped our perspectives on racism in America. We create multi-disciplinary theater to catalyze dialogue about our mis-education. By employing workshop models and dialogic tools inherited from the Free Southern Theater such as story circles, we create intentional space to engage in conversation to undo racism and other forms of oppression. We work with those willing to confront and question the biases inherent in the narratives we are taught about our country, our communities, and our selves through open discourse. We are deeply engaged in and accountable to the communities in which we work. We want those we interact with to join us in challenging the systems of oppression and privilege that we have all internalized, and to participate in collectively dismantling these systems.

Once VOIC’D organized themselves and articulated a well-defined mission, they reached out to Mr. O’Neal and Junebug Productions for support. VOIC’D was hoping that since they had come together under the auspices of Junebug Productions, that the group might be able to forge some sort of official working relationship moving forward. They were bound to need help fundraising and producing theater. Kiyoko approached Mr. O’Neal about sketching out the parameters of the VOIC’D-Junebug relationship. Tellingly, Terry was not invited to participate in this conversation. Mr. O’Neal was hesitant at first, but then downright refused VOIC’D’s invitation for rapprochement. He countered Kiyoko’s request by saying, “when I joined the movement I was barely in my twenties. My comrades and I were just twenty-somethings when we created FST. We didn’t have real jobs, we didn’t have any money. These VOIC’D people are in their

twenties and thirties, they have jobs. If they want to create a theater group, I don't see what's stopping them."

Perhaps Mr. O'Neal wanted to set the VOIC'D group loose from Junebug because he was burned out and ready to retire already. Perhaps Mr. O'Neal was thinking strictly in terms of the budget and how much it would cost to support VOIC'D. Or perhaps Mr. O'Neal was reticent about lending support because he didn't know what to make of the young upstarts and their aesthetic; or perhaps it was because of his vision that Junebug's aesthetic and programming be "generative" that he fully expected VOIC'D to operate independently. Whatever his reasons, the young people of VOIC'D felt the distrust spawned by the generation gap. Because they were not privy to the conversation cited above, the VOIC'D artists missed an opportunity to see just how out of touch Mr. O'Neal was with present realities: By comparing the contemporary moment and its possibilities to that of the 1960s, Mr. O'Neal glosses over the very real ways in which the political economy has developed over the last 50 years to preclude any such activism for today's young adults, struggling as they are to manage debt in addition to rising costs of living.

While VOIC'D has had a hard time finding its place under the Junebug umbrella, the Spring 2010 "From Community to Stage" course begins and it is almost entirely comprised of white women. There are 2 Black female high school students and a Black female college student from the dance department at Tulane University. Maybe sometime in February 2010, Mr. O'Neal told the following story at the From Community to Stage class: When FST moved to New Orleans in 1965, the first check they received was for \$15 from Langston Hughes. They wanted to frame the check, but they needed the \$15 too bad. While he was telling this story to his class one white guy (there were 2

in the room) did not know who Langston Hughes was. This young man was born and raised in the U.S. but had not heard of our poet. When Mr. O’Neal asked him had he heard of the Harlem Renaissance – in order to contextualize the writer and his work – the white guy said he hadn’t much heard of that either!

It certainly caught Mr. O’Neal by surprise that he would have to explain to the class the Harlem Renaissance much less Langston Hughes. Had the course been set up to give an overview of the Black arts in the U.S. and how they have shaped theater more broadly, perhaps this might have been a moment for which he or Kiyoko would be better prepared. But the question of Junebug’s overwhelmingly whiter and whiter audiences was one that had not been discussed openly within the organization, outside of Kiyoko’s apprehension at teaching so-called “Black theater” from a decidedly non-Black perspective. Junebug Productions up until that point had never laid out a clear community engagement/audience development plan targeting the “oppressed and exploited African Americans of the Black Belt South.” Why hadn’t they?

Many artists love to have their hands in all aspects of the business of creating and selling art. As people who are astute in discerning inspiration from disparate sources, it makes sense that artists might not easily pare down and focus on one task or job description. This dynamic has had negative consequences for Junebug Productions where the staff must figure out most of their duties on the fly. Because Junebug has become synonymous with the Story Circle methodology, it has been taken for granted by audience as well as staff and board members that the institution is informally organized, if not structureless, and adheres to the principal of democratic consensus. However, in an article by Jo Freeman, the author makes the point that structurelessness often serves as

a smokescreen, masking those who wield power and the parameters within which it is exercised. Mr. O’Neal, as the Founding Artistic Director – and as an artist with his hands in almost every aspect of the organization, seemed to run into trouble with younger generations, demanding transparency as a precondition of working together on equal terms. It was a real missed opportunity that Mr. O’Neal did not see himself and his struggles with Junebug Productions as worthy source material out of which to create relevant Black theater which addresses the common post-Katrina issues of place and belonging, class and access, race, age and political commitment.

The tensions within Junebug Productions were counterproductive. The precarious economic position of the artists and professionals described in the above passages remains a constant, if unspoken tension both individually and institutionally. Rather than seeing these tensions as generative and creatively mining them for theatrical material, the tensions amongst Mr. O’Neal, Terry, Kiyoko and VOIC’D created an atmosphere of stasis and suspicion. For example, Mr. O’Neal chose not to work with VOIC’D – perhaps Mr. O’Neal did not want to divert precious resources to producing their work, instead opting to stick to his own script. Indeed, with no retirement fund available, Mr. O’Neal very likely felt forced into remaining at the helm of the organization. Rather than looking forward to and/or strategically planning for Junebug’s next 5-10 years, Mr. O’Neal was looking forward to his own uncertain future with both anxiety and anticipation. He was at least excited to get back to his writing, and hopeful that he might finally get to wrap up some unfinished projects. He was anxious, knowing that as he left JPI he would no longer have a steady income, or even a reliable work space.

The same sense of capitalism-induced pressure surely must've been felt by Kiyoko, who attempted to communicate her hesitance to take on the role of instructor and community liaison as a non-Black woman, but was ultimately forced by economic necessity to take on the role. Terry and Mr. O'Neal agreed that it did not matter the fact of Kiyoko's non-Blackness, so much as she was able to feel confident in conveying a sense of historical continuity between present FSTI courses and past FST movement-building work. But Kiyoko seemed to feel tongue-tied and insecure, which colored the impression that many course participants would have of the entire organization. Kiyoko's ambivalence about what to include in the syllabus and how to facilitate cross-racial dialogue mirrored the ambivalence and hesitation with which Junebug Productions went about putting together programming and developing its audience. These internal impediments ultimately were the reason that Mr. O'Neal and FST/JPI were not successful in creating a new form of theater analogous to what jazz has been to American music. By failing to cultivate a democratic, participatory forum in which the tensions and interpersonal dynamics could be discussed, examined, and ultimately resolved either through institutional practices/organizational structure or through art-making, Junebug Productions guaranteed that it would continue to remain unfamiliar and irrelevant to the majority of Black New Orleanians.

Post-Katrina NGOs and philanthropy

In recent years, the Nathan Cummings Foundation has become a major supporter of Junebug Productions, raising all sorts of issues around the role of national foundations and local non-profits in post-Katrina New Orleans. Over the last ten years, Junebug

Productions has come to be dependent on grants not only from foundations like Nathan Cummings, but also from the state of Louisiana as well. Although the organization was founded in 1980, Junebug has not been able to fully capitalize upon its celebrated history. Instead, the organization relies on grants from the Louisiana Division of the Arts (LDA), a program of the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development, itself an agency within the Department of Culture, Recreation, and Tourism, under the Office of the Lt. Governor. Founded in 1977, the LDA is advised by two state-wide bodies, both appointed directly by the Governor. With a good portion of its operating budget coming from the LDA, Junebug is an example of “the state’s *ongoing absorption* of organized dissent through the non-profit structure” (INCITE! 2007: 23).

Junebug’s white organizational counterparts, on the other hand, have fared quite well with support from both the public and private spheres. For example, in 1974, the Arts Council of New Orleans (ACNO) incorporated as a 501c3 non-profit, becoming the city’s official arts agency. Today, Junebug is but one of the many arts organizations to which ACNO grants have been awarded. In 1976, the Contemporary Arts Center (CAC) was founded by a group of artists and activists dedicated to blurring artistic/disciplinary boundaries, and committed to producing socially-relevant works of art. Mr. O’Neal was one of the CAC’s founding artists; he worked out of the CAC for a number of years when he wasn’t touring with the FST or later with Junebug. Today, Junebug’s offices are located on the CAC’s second floor. Don Marshall, President of Junebug’s Board of Directors, also served as the founding director of the CAC in its early, formative years, before he left his post to serve as the Director of the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Foundation (NOJHFF). Marshall, a white New Orleanian, recalls that the

CAC produced ground-breaking art happenings in the late seventies and early eighties, and was the go-to resource for prominent local galleries hoping to cash in on the next cutting edge, art- world trend. However, by the 1990s, local Black artists and other artists of color alleged that CAC stood for “Caucasian Art Center.” Director of the CAC Jay Weigle remarked that after Katrina the arts institution rose to the top of the local totem pole as regards its levels of funding and prestige (personal communication 17 March 2011).

Arguably one of the largest and most influential non-profits to predate Katrina is the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival and Foundation (NOJHFF), an art and culture organization which administers Jazz Fest and the WWOZ 90.7 radio station. NOJHFF also provides grants to local artists and organizations for program and operational support. Founded in 1970, the foundation today has become a local juggernaut of an institution. Not surprisingly, the Board and Staff are predominantly white. NOJHFF is an archetypal example of a white-led, pre-Katrina non-profit: Founded by a group of local culture bearers, artists, and art enthusiasts, NOJHFF’s mission was to create a platform to showcase and perpetuate local art and culture. Today, NOJHFF “attracts hundreds of thousands of visitors to New Orleans and pumps \$300 million a year into the local economy” (<http://www.jazzandheritage.org/about-us>), principally by bringing in non-jazz, non-local, pop music acts. Many pre-Katrina NGOs began with momentum tediously built by local actors wishing to fill a void in the institutional infrastructure of New Orleans as well as augment the work of government agencies.

While the number of non-profits has sky-rocketed since the 1980s, private, white philanthropy has had a disproportionately powerful impact on the success or failure of

Black institutions for far longer than the last few decades. White philanthropists throughout the 19th century directed and supported many efforts at ameliorating poverty and advancing the cause of the Negro in order to keep the racial and economic peace. Often, white philanthropists believed in charity as the epitome of Christian morality, and these beliefs were echoed in the Black middle class ethos of “uplift” (Baker 1998). As the 20th century Civil Rights Movement gained steam, white philanthropists again sat at the table with Negro leaders to direct and support their efforts. In the 1950s and ‘60s the Rockefeller Foundation popularized support for the arts, and “philanthropic attention began to encompass a broader cultural universe, including community-based arts activity and support for artists’ work independent of specific commissions” (Sidford 2011: 7). In the legal sphere, organizations like the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and the American Civil Liberties Union have “been the biggest recipients of foundation support for civil rights and social action over the years. However, legal strategies that have so successfully promoted legal equality have been less effective at countering institutional and structural racism” (Pittz 2004: 9).

Today, the role of private white philanthropy in shaping not only the form that social justice advocacy takes, but also the content of such advocacy is undeniable. Scholar and activist, Dylan Rodríguez, describes the insidious way in which “forms of sustained grassroots social movement that *do not* rely on the material assets and institutionalized legitimacy of the NPIC [Non-profit industrial complex] have become largely *unimaginable* within the political culture of the current US Left” (INCITE! 2007: 27). Against their best interests, many nonprofits must tailor their programming to reflect the dictates of foundation grant requirements. This situation has been exacerbated by the

flood of corporate and foundation money pouring into the Gulf coast in the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005; “as of July 2009, the Foundation Center had tracked more than \$1 billion in grants and program-related investments (PRIs) from foundations, corporations, and other institutional donors for relief, recovery, and long-term rebuilding efforts in the aftermath of the 2005 Gulf Coast hurricanes Katrina and Rita” (Renz 2009: 1).

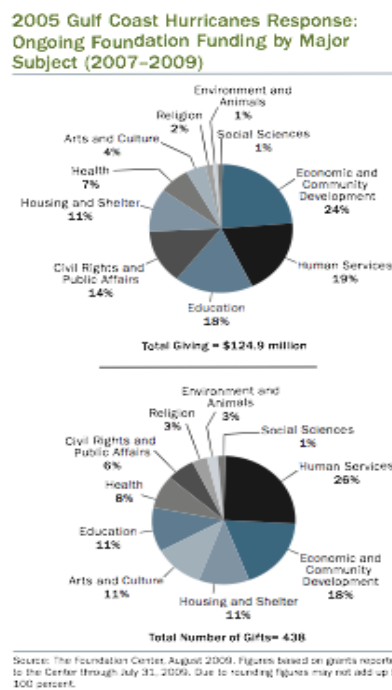


Figure 9: U.S. Philanthropy’s response to Hurricane Katrina.

While the more than \$1 billion in relief has been, no doubt, helpful to the work of rebuilding, “without an established and well-funded network of local organizations ready and able to represent the needs of the poor and disadvantaged, the communities on the Gulf Coast were at the mercy of the uncoordinated and unfocused government and large national organizations that often had differing priorities and concerns” (Usdin 2007: 8).

Predictably, the majority of philanthropic monies does not go to organizations led by people of color. The Greenlining Institute “defines a minority-led nonprofit as one whose staff is 50 percent or more minority; whose board is 50 percent or more minority; and whose mission statement and charitable programs aim to predominately serve and empower minority communities” (González-Rivera 2008: 5). Ostensibly, the word “minority” refers to the racial, ethnic, and sexual identity groups that, in sum, comprise the numerical majority of the U.S. population, and, in fact, the world. So-called “minority” representation is important to consider, because while an organization may be staffed by people of color principally, one must look to their Board of Directors in order to find out who is articulating the mission, defining the core values and principles, and otherwise setting the tone or enacting the culture of the organization and how it goes about achieving its goals.

Following these standards, Junebug Productions just barely passes muster as a Black-led entity. The staff of four – Mr. O’Neal, Terry, Kiyoko, and I – was 100% “minority.” During the time that I worked there, I attended several Board meetings. I observed that Mr. O’Neal was the only Black man on the board, while there were two Black women acting as Board Chair and Secretary – at his behest. Both women were executives: one at the Renaissance Project, a non-profit community development agency, and the other at New Corps a small business incubator. The rest of the Board was comprised of three white women – the Executive Director of the National Performance Network (NPN), an arts organization operating with a six-figure annual budget; a tenured Professor of Theater and Dance at Tulane University; and Mr. O’Neal’s long-time, Texas-based collaborator who wore altogether way too many hats within the Junebug

organization: Board Treasurer, JPI's booking agent for national tours, and Interim Director of the Free Southern Theater Institute to name; and two white men: the Executive Director of the Jazz and Heritage Foundation, which sponsors Jazz Fest every year and maintains both an esteemed national and local profile, as well as the Director of Resource Development for Xavier University, the historically Black, Catholic institution known for catering to the city's Black and Creole middle and upper classes. All of Junebug's Board Members were comfortably ensconced in the middle and upper classes themselves, and it seemed as though Mr. O'Neal was the one with the most tenuous economic position.

While the mission stated that Junebug was to create theater in support of oppressed and exploited (Black) people, the organization seemed to have trouble reaching its desired demographics. Be that as it may, however, the organization still did qualify as a Black-led non-profit; and consequently, the Greenlining Institute found that "minority-led organizations consistently receive a greater percentage of all grants than they do percentage of grant dollars, meaning that minority-led organizations are receiving smaller grants than mainstream organizations" (González-Rivera 2008: 4). And while the data reveal that "foundation giving to communities of color has increased in recent years, it has not kept pace with overall increases in philanthropic support" (Pittz 2004: 4).

The millions of dollars seemingly available to nonprofits like Junebug Productions and others post-Katrina, has really turned out to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, more opportunities have presented themselves for smaller nonprofits in the region to establish a rapport with the program officers in charge of disbursing foundation monies; on the other hand, however, while many grants awarded post-Katrina

aim to create a strong social impact in the ongoing rebuilding efforts, because many of the program officers are not people of color, nor are they terribly familiar with the region, they are ill-equipped to hold local organizations accountable for how they spend their money. The results may not be as effective as either party imagined. An example of this inefficacy can be seen in the following quote: “‘I do not have a definition of racial justice. So few foundations have race issues as an explicit, separate field in their program guidelines—it makes it difficult to define,’ admits Lance Lindblom, Chief Executive Officer and President of the Nathan Cummings Foundation” (Pittz 2004: 10).

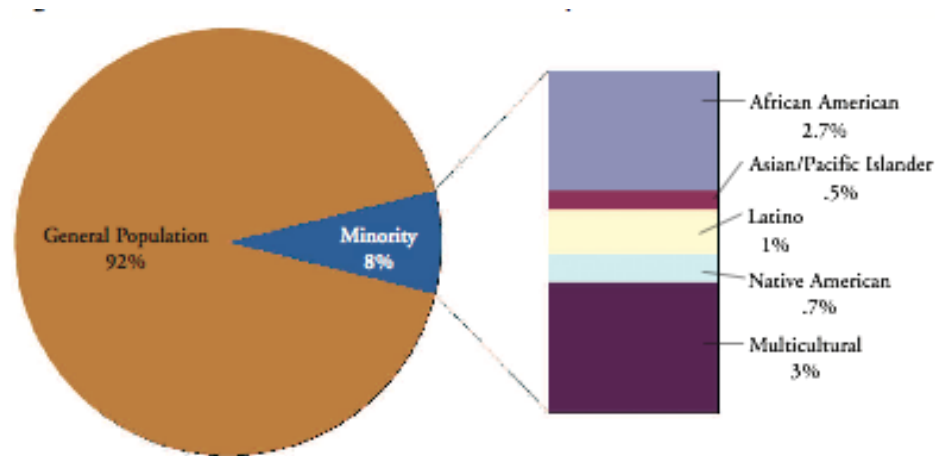


Figure 10: National foundation dollars awarded by race, 2005. (González-Rivera 2008:9).

The Nathan Cummings Foundation’s lack of clarity around what constitutes racial justice has indirectly hindered Junebug’s work by not having any tools or standards by which to hold the organization accountable to its goal of achieving racial justice. As of November 1, 2011 Junebug Productions’ facebook page states: “Our Mission is to create, produce, tour, and present high-quality performing art which supports and encourages oppressed and exploited African Americans in the Black Belt south who are working to improve the

quality of life available to themselves and others who are similarly situated. But upon reading this statement, one does not come away with a clear understanding of what it means to “support and encourage oppressed and exploited” peoples. The fact that the Nathan Cummings Foundation does not have a working definition of racism, or racial justice advocacy only compounds the confusion. In the end, awards are given either for general operating support or for more specific projects that may not indicate a clear vision or process for achieving such a vision. It must be said that “funding to communities of color for services and programs is not racial justice funding, nor is funding that targets interpersonal aspects of race and racism the same as promoting racial justice. Racial justice work specifically targets institutional and structural racism through public policy advocacy, organizing, research and education, and movement building” (Pittz 2004: 11).

As an arts organization that has been primarily led by people of color, and which places emphasis on the process of art-making sometimes much more than the artistic products themselves, Junebug Productions has an especially difficult task fundraising. Because Junebug Productions has in mind an audience comprised of “oppressed and exploited African-Americans” in the low-wage/Black Belt South, this has severely hampered their efforts at local fundraising among would-be Black patrons. Instead of earning income through ticket sales and workshop or course fees, the organization has chosen to rely on foundation support. JPI has achieved a modest level of success with foundations by asking for help in the institutionalization of the FST legacy. This strategy has proven somewhat effective because “the history of arts philanthropy in the United States is largely a story of building institutions, and preserving or creating artistic objects

and products” (Sidford 2011: 26). On the other hand, JPI faces the perpetual problem of acquiring general operating support for the implementation of other programs precisely because arts philanthropy has “paid far less attention to strengthening people and communities through artistic processes” (ibid loc.cit). Rather than support the so-called community-based arts whose aesthetics and practices often lie outside of the canon of western high art,

the majority of arts funding supports large organizations with budgets greater than \$5 million. Such organizations, which comprise less than 2 percent of the universe of arts and cultural nonprofits, receive more than half of the sector’s total revenue. These institutions focus primarily on Western European art forms, and their programs serve audiences that are predominantly white and upper income. Only 10 percent of grant dollars made with a primary or secondary purpose of supporting the arts explicitly benefit underserved communities, including lower-income populations, communities of color and other disadvantaged groups. And less than 4 percent focus on advancing social justice goals (Sidford 2011: 1).

Thus, “in the arts – philanthropy is using its tax-exempt status primarily to benefit wealthier, more privileged institutions and populations” (Sidford 2011: 4).

As they attempt to institutionalize their aesthetic and pedagogy through the implementation of the FSTI Junebug Productions has partnered with Tulane University, the foremost educational institution in New Orleans. However, this new deal essentially guarantees a sense of alienation in would-be Black participants, given Tulane’s reputation as an elitist, white supremacist good ol’ boys club. Mr. O’Neal and Terry sought to counteract the damage by registering FSTI classes with the Africana Studies Department, in hopes that the classes would draw African American students – or at least students who are interested in Black issues and sympathetic to social justice concerns. Flyers were posted around campus and an email “blast” was sent out to past Junebug audience members, course participants, donors and friends. The advertising for the classes was not effectively reaching Junebug’s desired audience as it relied on institutional affiliation as

well as access to the internet – neither of which the oppressed and exploited would have ready access to. On the one hand, Junebug’s FSTI advertising would only ever reach a certain class of young people on *this* side of the digital divide. On the other hand, Junebug’s FSTI advertising was attempting to reach out to a younger audience.

Part of the problem was that in post-Katrina New Orleans the Black population had been greatly diminished, numerically speaking. The 2010 census reveals that the city lost 118,526 African Americans mainly because of cost-prohibitive factors involved with repairing the damaged housing stock in flood-prone, Black neighborhoods (Plier, Allison. “What Census 2010 Reveals about Population and Housing in New Orleans and the Metro Area.” Last modified April 15, 2011, <http://www.gnocdc.org/Census2010/index.html>).

But of course, art is never a numbers game; it’s about emotion, about feelings. It seems as though white liberals are attracted to Junebug Productions because, while the mission statement is strongly worded, the culture of the organization is quite non-accusatory, and, in fact, owing to its history of cross-racial movement building, quite conciliatory. Due to a lack of clearly defined goals around audience and programming, which ultimately rests at the feet of the organization’s patriarch, Junebug has communicated to participants and audience members alike that whites are welcomed partners in the struggle for social justice. Many of the new-to-town white people who attend courses, plays and showcases are searching for a way to meaningfully connect with the Black people who already lived here before the storm. Junebug, makes these white people feel comfortable and validated about their engagement and their activism, without the fear of shaming.

Ultimately, it seems that the reason JPI caters to a majority white audience today, whereas it catered to and empowered its majority Black audience some 10-15 years ago, is because as an institution it has been unable to engage with a younger generation of Black artists and thinkers on an equal footing. Terry often remarked on the fact that Junebug had never produced a play that was not written by Mr. O'Neal. Sure, works by other authors had been *presented*, but none had been selected by Junebug to be produced and mounted with the organization's own resources. I believe this stems from the stubborn adherence to the ever-elusive Junebug aesthetic. And as for working hand in hand with younger artists to pass along the tenets and principles of Junebug's aesthetic, take for example, the situation with VOIC'D. Even when the young artists asked to work with Mr. O'Neal in a subordinate position, he refused. While Mr. O'Neal – or Baba John as some young people affectionately call him – has kept his personal relationships going over the years, he has not been able to translate that in the professional realm. It serves his advantage to keep the personal and the professional clearly separated, because he is never called into question about how he enters into working relationships with others and he can always fall back on a personal relationship that is tied up with admiration and respect. In short, as a charismatic leader, Mr. O'Neal makes people feel heard personally, but does not seem to engage in the riskier activities of power-sharing when it comes to the Junebug aesthetic or repertoire.



Figure 11: John O'Neal dressed as Baba Kwanzaa

Tellingly, the youngest people in the Spring 2010 From Community to Stage course, on account of their age, race, and class did not feel entitled to speak up and tell their stories. The two high school students were not consistently present or punctual because of the difficulty coordinating transportation after school. Because the new class of students didn't get along, and especially because they did not trust one another, the production

was really little more than a story circle on stage wherein each person has a few moments to share their “truths.” “It was painful to watch really” Terry complained.

Finally, on the suggestion of Kiyoko and Terry, Mr. O’Neal acquiesced and allowed an outside evaluator to come in and assess the class and how they felt about the course, as well as some of the staff and how they felt about the course. They chose Gia Hamilton, the Founding Director of the Gris Gris Lab (pronounced Gree-Gree), to conduct the assessment. A Black woman in her late 30s, Gia was born and raised in New Orleans East, a part of the city which enjoys its reputation for being a middle class enclave and refuge from the inner city while also paradoxically suffering from crime and violence. The daughter of a two-parent family with a measure of social status coming from an influential Creole legacy, Gia struck out on her own and landed in Brooklyn, New York, where she stayed for 13 years. Upon returning to her hometown, she established the Gris Gris Lab, “an international healing arts space in the middle of Central City [...] a collaboration of arts and urban agriculture and community building and healing work in one space” (Personal communication, December 12, 2010). Because of her holistic approach to community-building she seemed the perfect person to be able to hear and bring together central and outlying members of the Junebug constellation; Mr. O’Neal and Terry excitedly anticipated folding her recommendations into their strategic plan.

Having lost momentum and potentially having damaged relationships with the Fall 2009 cohort, as well as having heeded the recommendations put forth in the Gris Gris Lab assessment, JPI decided to restructure the From Community to Stage course given the lackluster performance in the final production of the Spring 2010 cohort.

Finally, it seemed, Junebug staff were all on the same page and trying to get the organization to live up to its mission. While I had excitedly volunteered to go door-to-door engaging with neighbors and community members about how we might make Junebug more relevant to the individuals and groups struggling to make their lives and their city better, it was apparent that this was a job far greater than I could handle by myself. So Mr. O’Neal called in the big guns: he contracted the help of his daughter, Wendi O’Neal.

Wendi is a large woman in her mid-to-late thirties with a buzz-cut mohawk and a laugh that wells forth from the gut bone. Born and raised in New Orleans, she is adamant that her father, having lived many decades in the city is *not* a New Orleanian. Wendi often talks about Junebug as though it were her sibling – a living, breathing being into which her father has poured his time, energy and affection; it is clear that there is a sense of sibling rivalry between Mr. O’Neal’s two “babies.” Yet, because Wendi herself grew up in the movement, often accompanying her father as he toured the country, she shares his love of liberation struggle and is therefore willing to offer her services time and again. And this wouldn’t be the first time. A master facilitator, Wendi is frequently sub-contracted by Junebug to run their post-production talk-backs and discussions, in addition to their story circles.

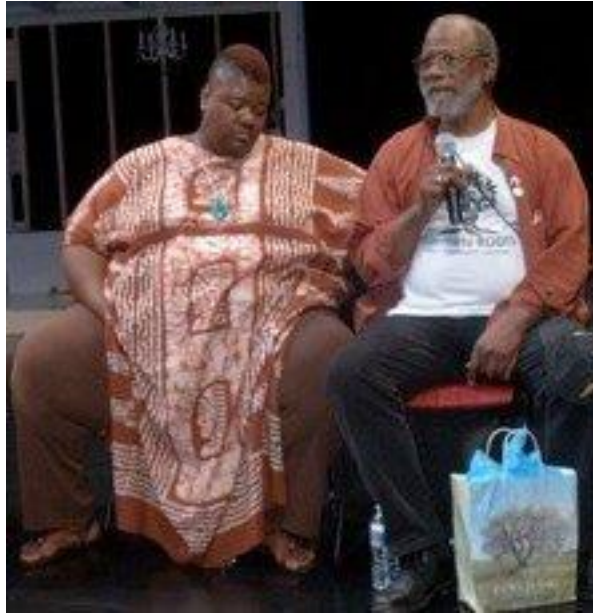


Figure 12: Wendi and John O'Neal, facilitating a story circle or talkback.

In fact, Wendi is so good at facilitating story circles that many individuals and groups request her at theirs. It was from this hard-earned popularity as the story circle “guru” that the idea was conceived to ask Wendi to teach a story circle course for Junebug’s educational arm Free Southern Theater Institute. The objective of the course as Wendi envisioned it reads as follows:

This course is an introduction to story circle methodology and practice, as developed by the Free Southern Theater, and Junebug Productions. The purpose of this class is for participants to become familiar with the story circle process as well as the values, principles and culture this process is rooted in. Participants will be able to lead story circles and adapt it for use in their own community work, with the central question being, “How can story circles be used for transformative action?” Through listening and telling stories, planning story circles, hosting and facilitating story circles, group discussion, suggested readings, video and creative exercises participants will become expert listeners, and potential cultural organizers (Story Circle Syllabus Fall 2010).

This course, with Wendi at the helm was designed to reinvigorate Junebug’s commitment to its aesthetic, its values, and to strategic community engagement. Having worked at 1600 Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard with the community groups housed therein -- Safe Streets Strong Communities (SSSC), Family and Friends of Louisiana’s

Incarcerate Children (FFLIC), and the Juvenile Justice Project of Louisiana (JJPL) – Wendi already had cultivated supportive and productive relationships with the constituency that Junebug was trying to reach. The story circle was offered as a methodology that activists at FFLIC, SSSC and JJPL might use in their work to 1) support the survivors of police terrorism and incarceration, and 2) to reform the criminal injustice system. Through their work with Wendi and with Junebug, these organizations have learned that they must incorporate “culture” into their organizing philosophy so they’ve begun to facilitate their own story circles at member meetings, staff meetings, and in community engagement events.

Conclusion

As has been observed in the case of Junebug Productions, the work of cultural organizing does not go without its attendant racial, generational and gendered power dynamics. Racialized power dynamics at Junebug manifest themselves in the structure of the organization itself. As a non-profit entity, it relies upon the largesse of white institutions and funders to be able to execute its mission. However, its mission is, in turn, informed by the language of the Civil Rights Movement as well as the language of the philanthropic world. A Board of Directors more thoroughly and directly impacted by the forces of oppression and exploitation might help Junebug to achieve its goals of supporting the oppressed and exploited in New Orleans and beyond, but it seems that the Board has been hamstrung by their own internal dynamics which have been influenced by differences in race, gender, class, and ideology. Tellingly, there are no Board

members under the age of 40, so questions of generation, relevance and youth culture go largely unexamined at Junebug Board meetings.

The power dynamics at work within the FST and Junebug constellation point to an unspoken generation gap. This has been observed in the contention between Mr. O'Neal and Terry, as well as Junebug and VOIC'D. Junebug's audiences have become older and whiter in large part because the organization has chosen not to invite the meaningful participation of younger generations. Courses and workshops designed to invite the participation of the youth are institutionally tied to New Orleans' colleges and universities, thereby ensuring that participants will be 18 or above, and have a certain measure of class status or cultural capital. Moreover, why was Wendi not called in to teach a story circle class when Junebug was first envisioning, implementing, and fundraising for the FSTI? While many older activists have bemoaned the current state of affairs in the Black community, it becomes clear that the social breakdown many community elders speak of tends to stem from the suspicion and distance with which they engage young people. Even when younger generations ask for the mentorship and guidance of their elders, they are met with the equivalent of "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" from those with more social and political capital, as well as access to financial and institutional resources. And because of missed opportunities within the movement to address economic injustice, much of the generation gap can be attributed to financial hardship. In other words, older movement veterans have no movement pensions to rely upon, and so cling ever more tightly to positions which provide a measure of economic benefit or political clout. Ultimately, Terry left the organization because there were no frameworks in place for the equitable sharing of power and authority.

Within Junebug, the gender dynamic has remained largely untouched from the days of FST when female members were expected to attend to the daily operations while the men were free to philosophize about the mission, and theorize about art and community with would-be supporters and funders. Outside of the organization, yet squarely within the FST's contemporary constellation, Black women like Gia Hamilton and Wendi O'Neal are asked to recommend and implement the changes necessary to keep Junebug accountable to its mission. Unfortunately, the women already working as staff within the organization were not asked for their input. But since Junebug was trying to capture the hearts and minds of the progressive, and/or activist Black community, the first place Wendi and I went was Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard.

Conscious community building as cultural organizing strategy

Although the case of Junebug Productions has illustrated the ways in which Black-led arts organizations have struggled to appease funders and would-be patrons alike, this next chapter details the ways in which the political climate and the NGO landscape in post-Katrina New Orleans has been particularly challenging for Black women to navigate. The election of Mayor Landrieu in 2010 turned out to be quite a watershed moment, ushering in an administration eager to ramp up and support the cultural economy. While on the one hand, the women and institutions I will be discussing in this chapter are working to capitalize on the State's investments in the cultural economy, on the other hand, the very same women and institutions are only able to do so in a limited capacity because the concomitant changes to the political climate and NGO landscape have all but disappeared Black women from positions of leadership within their communities.

Against this backdrop, the accomplishments of the Black female-led institutions discussed below can be read as all the more important to the processes of cultural organizing and community building. Improvising on the total institution, in which all aspects of life can be administered and carried out, away from society, and with a large group of like-minded or similarly situated individuals (Goffman 1990), institutions like those described below, in fact, place resources and power at the service of the individual to “protect him [sic] from the state and an unsympathetic social milieu” (Gordon and Williams 1977: 23). True to Black feminist form, these institutions create a Black female sphere of influence in which Black women, men and children are free to define themselves, both individually and as a community; also true to form, these institutions

exist within the “dialectic of oppression and activism, the tension between the suppression of African-American women’s ideas and our intellectual activism in the face of that suppression” (Collins 1990), which characterizes the politics of Black feminist thought.

The post-Katrina NGO landscape and Black women’s place within it

The election of New Orleans’ first white mayor in some 30 years happening in tandem with the Saints’ first superbowl win was, indeed, nothing less than a watershed moment. Mitch Landrieu is political royalty in Southern Louisiana, and it was only a matter of time before his political aspirations came true. Before becoming Mayor of the city, Mitch Landrieu served as the Lieutenant Governor of Louisiana. During his tenure in office, he helped to popularize his home state as a tourist destination, and proclaimed himself the cultural economy Czar. Mayor Landrieu’s sister, Mary Landrieu is the Senior U.S. Senator of Louisiana, and one of the most conservative Democrats on the Hill. Their father, Moon Landrieu, was the last white Mayor of New Orleans before desegregation. Landrieu Sr. is credited with integrating City Hall before he went on to become the Secretary General of Housing and Urban Development; as discussed in chapter three, Landrieu Sr. used strategically-placed Black “leaders” to defuse racial unrest in the tumultuous days of the 1970s. Fittingly, in March 2010, Mitch Landrieu would pick up where his father left off, becoming the first white Mayor of New Orleans in the post-integration period.

The superbowl victory shined the national media spotlight on the city's long road to recovery, while the ascension of Prince Landrieu to his throne ensured that the levers of power would be placed firmly back in white hands. One way to do this, was to shore up the support of incoming white professionals. Sheperded by Landrieu's former office of the Lt. Governor, the Louisiana Office of Cultural Development website states that the Cultural Districts program "was created by ACT 298 of the 2007 regular session of the legislature; its primary goal is to spark community revitalization based on cultural activitiy through tax incentives." As of February 2010, when Landrieu won mayoral office, the LA Office of Cultural Development counted 51 cultural districts throughout the state. Linking art and culture to a broader project of urban "revitalization," the Cultural Districts program seems to be a measure designed to capitalize upon the influx of artists, activists, and the so-called "creative class" (Florida 2002) in the wake of hurricane Katrina.

Perhaps not so coincidentally, since the inception of the Cultural Districts program, New Orleans has become overrun with non-profits and organized mission trips. Because of the national outpouring of support and sympathy, the city is still figuring out what to do with all of the volunteers – mostly young, white and class-privileged – who have flooded into the city to help since 2005. UNO Sociologist Rachel Luft (2006), as well as activists and founding members of the Common Ground Relief organization (South End Press 2007) remark that the question still remains unanswered as to when it is time for volunteers to leave.

At first, white volunteers were encouraged to come to New Orleans by Black New Orleanians. Elizabeth Fussell (2006) explores the class differences in access to resources

and social networks and concludes that emergency responders did not offer assistance in getting folks connected to friends and loved ones, which would have empowered survivors to regroup and activate their own networks and resources for rebuilding. It is because of this racialized and class-dependent access to people, power, and material resources that Malik Rahim, founder of Common Ground, a relief organization, writes that he sent out a desperate call for help using the radio, internet, and phone in order for white activists to come down to New Orleans and put their racial and class privileges to the service of aiding and empowering Black storm survivors; he put out an SOS to activists of all colors, but particularly white activists to come down to New Orleans and capitalize on their relative freedom of movement in and around the city, as well as to stand as a buffer for Black survivors against white vigilante/military/police violence (South End Press 2007).

But since the initial Katrina disaster subsided, journalist Jordan Flaherty has identified New Orleans as a part of the “global revolutionary tourism circuit” (South End Press 2007: 115), which also includes places like Palestine, Cuba and Chiapas. Social justice activist Joanna Dubinsky (2007) writes that while volunteerism may be an effective stop-gap measure, it alone cannot resolve the widespread problems posed after Katrina. Members of the New Orleans chapter of INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence discuss the whitening of New Orleans through “volunteer fallout” or “back-door disaster gentrification” (South End Press 2007: 42). The problem of white volunteers overstaying their welcome stems partly from the pernicious colonialist myth that Black people, content to be the subjects of others, are psychologically unable to govern themselves (Mannoni 1990).

Rachel Luft (2008) details how the legacy of colonialism has morphed into a missionary zeal to help or assist underprivileged communities; she makes clear that the climate of “disaster masculinity” (17), supported by the demands of hard physical labor such as house-gutting, as well as the overall lack of structure and accountability contributed to an environment at Common Ground Relief where the possibility for sexual violence against the many transient female volunteers was ripe. Colonial modes of social control also informed the reactions of Common Ground members and leaders who sought to minimize the “allegations” and displace conversations about guilt and accountability. In almost all the cases of reported rape at Common Ground, the perpetrators were white, male, nonlocal volunteers, however, rather than dealing with the issue of sexual harassment and/or violence within Common Ground the organization chose to criminalize the surrounding Black community thereby letting white male sexual violence go unnamed and unaccounted for – and leaving the white women volunteers in even more danger. Luft illustrates how the absence of Black women made these injurious responses possible, as local Black women activists’ concerns were dismissed, pushing them out of the organization; additionally, many of the houses Common Ground was able to work out of were owned by Black women who had not been able to return to their homes and neighborhoods.

The disappearance of Black women from their homes in the Lower 9th Ward runs parallel to the disappearance of Black women from the local public school system. Education is an important dimension of Black women’s political activism and historically has offered an effective avenue and powerful symbol with which to explore the connections between identity, subjectivity, empowerment, and liberation in Black

communities (Freire 2010 [1970]; Lerner 1972; Webber 1978; Davis 1983; Perkins 1983; Collins 1990; hooks 1994) – thereby making the disappearance of Black women from this important sphere of the public sector all the more injurious to Black communities at large. Patricia Hill Collins writes that historically, Black women have seen “the activist potential of education and skillfully used this Black female sphere of influence to foster a definition of education as a cornerstone of Black community development” (1990: 210).

In post-Katrina New Orleans, education has been literally re-formed at the expense of Black women and children. For example, in November 2005, while most Southeastern Louisiana residents were actively forming a Katrina Diaspora, living in makeshift shelters and formaldehyde-contaminated FEMA trailers, or with friends and relatives outside of their home state, a legislative session was held in Baton Rouge which successfully passed Act 35, changing the definition of a “failing” school. By manipulating the state-wide standards for high-stakes test scores, the state empowered itself to take over whichever schools it saw fit. At the same time, some 7,500 unionized public school teachers and administrators – the vast majority of them Black women – were placed on disaster-leave without pay. Act 35, in conjunction with the firing of the teachers’ union essentially cleared the path for white outsiders to come in and effectively wrest control of local schools out of the hands of local Black educators and school leaders. Because Teach for America (TFA) wasn’t bringing in enough new teachers to replace the ones that had been fired, TeachNOLA was also created to recruit new teachers for Orleans Parish Public Schools. In tandem, these programs pump in an “endless labor supply” of young white women and men, the majority of whom have

absolutely no prior classroom experience (D. Roguski. Personal communication. April 5, 2013).

Hurricane Katrina provided the opportunity for the state to give Orleans Parish a facelift: Where once the schools were led and administered by middle-aged Black women, today those same schools – whose students bodies have remained demographically the same – are peopled with young white women and to a lesser extent their male counterparts. Like the descendants of the white homesteaders out West, white public school teachers in New Orleans are slow to acknowledge the fact that the field was violently, and intentionally cleared to make room for them to flourish. Because TFA and TeachNOLA require a two-year commitment, there is quite a bit of turnover from one year to the next. In fact, TeachNOLA was created in part because so many TFA teachers were leaving their schools after their first semester (Adrienne Dixon. Personal communication. April 5, 2013). Not only does the forced removal of Black women from the Orleans Parish Public Schools disrupt the stability and earning potentials of former teachers' families and neighborhoods, but so too does the constant influx of new, unseasoned white teachers disrupt the stability and progress of the schools themselves. The present situation, catalyzed as it was by Katrina, however, is not without precedent:

In comparing the letters of Black and White women applying to missionary societies to become teachers in the South after the Civil War, historian Linda Perkins (1983) uncovered some significant differences. Overwhelmingly single, upper- and middle-class, unemployed and educated in New England colleges and Oberlin, White women wrote of the “deep need to escape idleness and boredom” brought on by their placement in the cult of true womanhood. In contrast, the Black women who applied were employed and financially supported families, and their letters consistently reflected themes of duty and race uplift. While White women working in the South generally did so for two to three years, Black women expressed the desire to “devote their entire lives to their work” (Collins 1990: 212).

A 2012 report by the Urban Institute observed that in 2010, 100% of New Orleans' senior services and childcare NGOs were Black-led, where youth-oriented NGOs represented

the largest racial discrepancies between institutional leadership and its constituent base (De Vita, Blackwood and Roeger 2012). For example, many of the post-Katrina NGOs are charter schools and their management companies. The largest of these, KIPP, is based on San Francisco with regional offices in Chicago, New York, and Washington D.C. KIPP operates nine schools in New Orleans presently.

Suddenly, the Katrina disaster exposed many such voids and catalyzed the onslaught of NGOs that were to come. Post-Katrina non-profits tend to fall into two broad and often overlapping categories: those started by locals and those started by “transplants.” Of the NGOs started by locals in the wake of the Katrina disaster, many were incorporated to meet basic needs and provide a structure for vulnerable storm survivors to organize around those needs. A prominent example of this phenomenon would be the Peoples’ Hurricane Relief Fund, which has since disbanded, or Common Ground Relief. Of the NGOs started by “transplants” after the Katrina disaster subsided, many tend to cohere around social entrepreneurship which aims to meet social needs while also turning a profit. For example, the most recent types of non-profits in New Orleans after Katrina tend to be charter schools and their management organizations, as well as incubators and support organizations for local businesses.

On other side of the racial divide, Black-led NGOs which pre-date hurricane Katrina tend to enjoy less name recognition, and fewer funding dollars. Within the larger landscape of the city’s non-profit groups and institutions, the Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard group of non-profits stands out as small, community-based, Black-led organizations that practice differing models of community organizing. Located in Central City, the neighborhood with the highest murder and violent crime rates in New

Orleans, and just a stone's throw from the Lower Garden and the Central Business Districts, these non-profit institutions include Safe Streets, Strong Communities (SSSC); Family and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC); and the Ashé Cultural Arts Center. In fact, all of these social-justice minded groups sit within one city block of each other. All except the Ashé Cultural Arts Center can be found in the same building on 1600 Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard. While their missions are different, and they vary in structure and size, SSSC, FFLIC, and Ashé all seem to work synergistically. The Ashé Cultural Arts Center is not a non-profit, it's a project of Efforts of Grace, LLC – which *is* a non-profit entity – and it seems to possess the most capital of any on OC Haley, anchoring the recent Cultural District, especially after Katrina when philanthropists and entrepreneurs alike have invested so much in New Orleans.

Social entrepreneurialism as a form of Black feminist movement

With Black women disappeared not only from the physical landscape, but also from the crucial realm of education, the city of New Orleans has participated in creating the correct conditions in which to circulate the myth of its “fresh start” or “clean slate.” Given the constraints placed on Black women who choose to enter into the uphill battle of rebuilding their communities, I have chosen to highlight the Black women whose cultural organizing efforts have offered a counterpoint to the oft-told stories of invisibility, incompetence, and disappearance. Cultural organizing led by Black women in New Orleans takes place in hybridized institutions which aim to support the whole person as he or she comes into a new awareness of self and attempts to “exit the matrix”

so to speak. Creating Black female spheres of influence, these forms of entrepreneurialism also double as strident forms of Black feminist movement vis-a-vis community building, at a time when communities are being dismantled and self-determination precluded.

This chapter will discuss the Black, female-led institutions which have not only worked in conjunction with Junebug Productions but also have taken alternative approaches to cultural organizing and community building. I will examine the Ashé Cultural Arts Center in Central City, which is the principal project of a non-profit entity; I will also examine the Gris Gris Lab in Central City, as well as the Community Book Center in the Seventh Ward. By including the Gris Gris Lab and the Community Book Center, both for-profit cultural institutions led by Black women born and raised in the city of New Orleans, I aim to expand my discussion of cultural organizing. Because the post-Katrina non-profit industrial complex has facilitated the displacement of Black women from certain segments of the labor market as well as displacing them from traditional community relations, the leaders of the institutions discussed below provide models of community-building that are holistic, and that allow these women to do the work they love while also earning a living.

As professionals and business-owners, the women discussed below speak against the racialized and gendered myths of dependency and incompetence which color the nonprofit industrial complex; moreover, their approaches stand in stark contrast to the non-profit models of community organizing which, because they usually rely on external sources of funding, tend not to be able to act with complete autonomy and, which usually produce a high turnover rate due to inconsistent funding cycles, as well as constant

physical and emotional burn-out. While the cultural institutions discussed in this chapter do not advocate using art and culture to move a specific policy agenda, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, the Gris Gris Lab, and the Community Book Center have each demonstrated a clear set of politics in addition to a commitment to community building and social justice, if not cultural organizing.

The Ashé Cultural Arts Center

Ashé is a big hulk of a building that takes up one full block of Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard. The center is hard to miss not just on account of its size; the building houses one of very few functional and operating businesses on that once bustling corridor. Before it was called Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard, the street was named Dryades. Dryades street was semi-rural up until the mid nineteenth century when Irish immigrant and entrepreneur, Patrick Irwin, opened the Dryades Street Market. Property values increased in the surrounding Uptown neighborhood, and immigrants of all European nationalities found work in the bustling commercial center. By the turn of the twentieth century, Dryades street hosted a growing number of Jewish merchants and business owners; however, the street and the neighborhood would not yet be considered a Jewish enclave:

Next door to Jewish retailers in the heart of the commercial strip stood, in the late nineteenth century, St. Mary's Dominican Convent, the Christian Brother's College, St. John's Parochial School, and the German Presbyterian Church. Thousands of poor blacks [sic], many of them emigrants from Louisiana plantations following emancipation, settled on the "woods" side of the street. Dryades became the number two retail district in the city, second only to Canal, and the number-one street for Black shoppers (Campanella 2006: 270).

A more Orthodox Jewish-owned commercial presence existed on South Rampart Street, on which Congo Square still sits. Geographer Richard Campanella writes of Dryades street,

Racial-composition maps made by the WPA in the 1930s show that Jewish retailing along South Rampart and Dryades formed a commercial interface between the white front-of-town (including the CBD and residential areas) and the Black residential back-of-town. Dryades itself formed an integrated retail district for African Americans living almost exclusively behind Dryades, and for ethnic whites living almost as exclusively riverside of Dryades (Campanella 2006: 270-1).

By the 1950s, this semi-porous racial and commercial interface was losing ground as white city residents began to move in more racially segregated residential patterns. The bellwether of the neighborhood, the Dryades Street Market, closed around 1950 as its white customers moved away or drove to the suburbs to do their shopping (Campanella 2006: 279). Because the Dryades street commercial corridor was for a long time the only place where Black people were allowed to shop – though they were unable to try anything on in the department stores – Jewish businesses were especially hard hit by the unrest which led to desegregation. As Black activists launched boycotts which would later take hold across the city, gaining Black consumers access to Canal Street businesses, Dryades street's Jewish business owners closed their doors and relocated to other white enclaves both in the city and in the surrounding suburbs.

In 1977, with Dryades Street's surrounding neighborhood having fully lost its white residents and businesses, Black activists – Mr. Waters and Mr. Suber among them – succeeded in renaming Melpomene from Baronne Street to Earhart Boulevard, including its prominent intersection with Dryades where the market once stood; that section of Melpomene is now called Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard. The entire street

could not be renamed because the white residents of the Lower Garden District and their political representatives objected obstreperously.

In 1989, Dryades street from Howard avenue to Philip Street was renamed Oretta Castle Haley Boulevard in honor of the famous civil rights activist. Signaling the area's total and complete transformation, Campanella writes "what was once unofficially but universally known as 'the Dryades street neighborhood' is now officially called Central City" (ibid loc.cit). By the end of the twentieth century, the neighborhood would become near 100% Black and impoverished. The only businesses located there are now beauty shops, corner stores, and bars. "Vacancies increase, to the point that directories in the 1990s no longer bothered to list them" (ibid loc.cit). There are hundreds of storefront churches, mostly Baptist and Pentecostal, as well as ever-increasing numbers of social service agencies and NGOs aimed at serving the poor Black families that live there.

Carol Bebel, Ashé's co-founder talks about the shape the street was in during the late nineties when she moved into the neighborhood:

So really it was '97, the early part of '97. And the developer for the bank was interested in having something going on so that people could begin to re-imagine what this boulevard was. Cuz the boulevard had been thriving in the '60s and '70s, had fallen into the same kind of malaise and decline that inner-city commercial districts did when people started moving -- you know, integration happened and white folks started moving to the suburbs, and Black folks started making more money and moving to the suburbs too, and building their own. And so the late '80s and the '90s were about those communities essentially winding up being places where very poor people lived, not many resources were, and where lawlessness became a major influence. And so that's what was happening on the boulevard. And so in making a major investment in this building, they were looking for a way to be able to start to send a signal that something was gonna be happening on the boulevard (Personal communication, June 11, 2011).

Ashé's colorful, provocative window displays make it seem like there's more inside than there really is (most of the time): The windows showcase beautiful wooden sculptures, African drums, vibrant scarves, clothing, and beadwork inviting the passer-by to what she might think is either an Afrocentric boutique or a museum -- or some combination of the

two. The festive window dressings match the vibrant, larger than life mural looming over the building's small, adjacent parking lot. The mural depicts various aspects of the Central City community like church choir singers, Mardi Gras Indians in full regalia, the Claiborne overpass, and more.



Figure 13: Mama Carol standing in front of the mural commissioned by the Ashé Visual Artists Guild.

As you enter the first door of the Ashé you are greeted usually by an elderly Black woman seated at a large desk. The make-shift reception area offers a variety of literature and rack cards for local agencies, groups and initiatives pertaining to almost any aspect of Black life, whether it's healthcare, entertainment, or education. An oversize portrait of Ashé's founders Carol Bebel and Douglas Redd smiles down on its visitors. Behind the wall of the reception area, hides Mama Carol's office, crammed as it is with books,

binders, and loose leaf papers. And behind her office, or really surrounding and camouflaging it, there's a small boutique set up with CDs, DVDs, greeting cards, small decorative house wares, books, and jewelry. The boutique extends into a small enclosed space next to a glass display case where you will find more jewelry and clothing (like dashikis, wrap dresses, and tie-die or batik skirts). Most of the clothing is rather pricey and the merchandise doesn't seem to ever change really, which makes me think that those larger items don't really sell. The smaller items like the jewelry, books and CDs are made or authored by local artists, writers, and researchers. Abutting the boutique is an open space with small stage often used for dance classes, theater productions, or visual art exhibits. In the far back on the mezzanine level sit many desks at which the army of Ashé staff and consultants conduct the center's daily business.

The first time I visited the Ashé was in the Fall of 2009. I went there on the strength of so many personal recommendations. I already had met Mama Carol at Mr. O'Neal's house for dinner months earlier, and she had told me a little bit about her work. I wasn't sure what the hours of operation were, but I wanted to stop in and re-introduce myself, now that I was living in the city on a more permanent basis. I didn't see any lights on behind the elaborate window displays so I peered in through the door, there was only a sliver of glass remaining, as the rest of the door was almost completely papered over with pamphlets, flyers and rack cards advertising shows, activities, and everything else it seemed – except their hours of operation. As I turned to leave, heading back to my car, a crowd approached. They seemed to be in a celebratory mood. I recognized Mama Carol among the group. She motioned for me to follow, and we all entered the space

together. Inside I was introduced to the many Black women – New Orleanians all of them – who form the back bone of the organization.

Our introductions were lubricated with champagne as the staff had just returned from a meeting with the Mayor's office; Ashé had been approved for a city loan allowing them to purchase the entire building, which included another first-floor gathering space much larger than the one previously described, as well as a second and third floor of renovated loft apartments. Entering the Ashé through its second door, farther down the block, you will find a very large, very spare space with concrete floors. I've seen it used for lectures, dance parties, and art expositions, as well as for a memorial service. The capacity on this side of the building is at least a couple hundred, while the side with the boutique and offices, has a gallery/theater space that if you put chairs in it can really only hold about 50-75 people. Since folks began moving into the Ashé's rental apartments in 2010, the center has become even more of a hub. At least sixty people – mostly artists and activists, and all of them Black – call the Ashé Cultural Arts Center home. You can hear the music and talking and singing below the floorboards of the second floor apartments. Each unit is designed like a loft with tall ceilings and exposed brick walls. There are a number of subsidized units where tenants pay less than \$600/month. A few market-rate apartments allow the landlord, Efforts of Grace LLC, to turn a small profit, which they then promptly re-invest in Ashé.

Mama Carol talks about how Efforts of Grace came into existence when she says that

Efforts of Grace really became the name of the work that Douglass and I started doing together. So I had, like, moving into 30 years of public sector work in human service planning and program development administration. And I decided to step out of that line of work, greatly influenced by what had become my hobby when I was doing that work which was working in and with community-based organizations -- a lot of them being

cultural and cultural arts. So I'd done work with Junebug, I worked with the contemporary arts center, and all that kinda stuff and around planning things and community engagement and all that. So I kinda stepped off, cuz I really decided that I really -- I thought that there was someplace else that I could make a better contribution than in government... I found government very frustrating at times.

And in doing that work, both the work of city government and branching off on my own, I became more and more aware of Douglass's work. He was a community-based visual artist who made his practice of visual art really about serving the needs of the community. And so more and more we started working together and discovered that we both had some similar notions about how there was more that could be rallied for our community than was currently happening. He was wanting to create a way in which the community almost became his art project. So it was like installation after installation based on whatever it is that you were doing. And because my art form is writing, I really was discovering more and more how words are very powerful but there's nothing more powerful than image. And so the whole notion of kinda being able to put word and vision together in some way was really important. So we really more and more started doing projects together, and then finally an opportunity presented itself, we started doing creative projects together. So we first started doing projects that we were hired for together. And then we started thinking about projects that we wanted to do together; those projects tended to be performance based, multi-disciplinary and they required space. So I spent a fair amount of time begging, borrowing and stealing space. And then we came to a point when the building that we're currently in [1718 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd] was being renovated by First NBC [formerly Dryades Bank] ... and at that point the boulevard was really in bad, bad shape...

[The developers] met with us primarily to encourage us to consider coming to the boulevard... And so we talked with them and we walked in on December 15th cuz it was his [Douglas Redd's] birthday: December 15th of 1998. [...] And we had a place. And then, then it was a matter of really figuring out what we wanted to do there. So the worst case scenario was that it was gonna be a big studio space and gallery for Doug, which he wasn't really excited about doing. But *if nothing else* took, then we could always back up to that. And so we could, you know, make it a party place, and that kinda stuff. But we really wanted a chance at being able to evolve something different. And so we both had ideas, and part of why the look of Ashé is so stimulating is because that was the part of the formula that Doug brought: that this would be a place that was -- that you could *know* that people of African descent were the ones who were in charge of it and that was the message of the place, that was the personality of it. That it was welcoming and colorful and attractive, and that people mingled there; and you took care of business and they had fun, and then they would be able to share their creative works with each other. So that was kinda like the art-cultural agenda. And then for me, it was the whole notion of being able to create a world that was *ours* to run, and that was *ours* to do with as we wanted to. And that could be as small a dream as we could think of -- or an idea -- to the biggest dream we could have.

And our symbol of that is our signature production which is *The Origin of Life*, which really started off being that book, right there [points to the book on her shelf]. You know, I read the book and I had been a child of mythology so when other people were reading fairy tales I was reading mythology. And I just really, in my 30s I guess, when I really started to focus more on African mythology I thought that this was really so sad that had not been a part of what I had grown up on; that I couldn't call Oshun and Yemaya and Shango's name like I could call Mercury, Venus, and Apollo's names. Doug knew that I was really angsting a little bit about it and he said: "well you know, what do you wanna do about that?" and so the whole notion of wanting to put together a dance theater piece was born. And neither one of us was a dancer or actor, but we got started. So 12 or 15 years later this show has become a Big Easy Award-winner, we're touring, and we're still investing in it because it really is a major way to engage people who have never been involved in Africaneity [sic] into a concept of the African that puts us at the very beginning and being the ones who got the world started. And so it's a fabulous

engagement often that we don't get an opportunity to really benefit from because, you know, we often perform, we work with the kids in the classroom, the teachers in fact more so, the teachers and the kids before the performance, and then they come to the performance. And often we do it as a residency where the kids do projects based on it [the performance]. And so we're just really thankful that because we passed through, because our paths crossed with those folks that there's a way in which they look at the world that's totally different now. Because there's this new idea on the landscape about the possibility that the world got started in Africa, and that African people were the original people. And for them it's a new idea, although it's a fact for scientists because the way the world operates would make you presume something different. And that people don't really talk about that a lot because they really don't want people to understand that that's a real foundational truth.

So in doing this project really helped us to understand that if you're faithful and you're willing to work and *money is not the object*, you can do anything. That you really can do anything. The issue of whether or not it winds up being something that somebody else will appreciate to the same extent, you know, if that matters to you or you need that kind of acknowledgement then, you know, so be it. But if you work primarily from being really convinced that it's something that needs doing and there's someone who can benefit from it, if everyone doesn't benefit from it -- and even if some people feel like it was a waste of time -- if there are people who benefit from it then it was a good thing to do. And so we have kind of evolved because I had done years of work doing community organizing, community engagement, collaborative-style planning and all that kinda stuff. That part was easy to approach, but every circumstance creates its own lessons. And Doug was pretty much a magician. It was like if you could think it, he could make it. If there was a problem and he could put his mind on it then he could figure a way out to solve it, especially if it had physicality to it. Because I was the negotiator and he was really more kind of in charge of his world, he was a collaborator. We also kind of balanced each other in terms of the extent to which I was willing to go to get something accomplished and his capacity to say: "enough is enough. we not doing it." So we learned from each other in terms of that. And so we got started.

We got started doing community-based events and we got started doing kinda this art-for-life practice that we have. And really thinking about how it is -- what's going on in the community. How can we essentially help? What are the contributions that we can make? And how can we help people to learn in different ways? And so our performance portfolio includes work that has themes around illiteracy, the whole concept of being African-centered, race and racism with story circles, *Shine Shine Shine* [a play] which we're still trying to get finished from our illustrious and wonderful John O'Neal; and the health nuts and food for thought which are in development now which are really around the whole issue of food and the nourishment and the struggle that it has become in our lives. And then simultaneous with that in terms of trying to engage with *the community* we've really created these pathways so that you're not constantly creating things, so we've got Sistas Making a Change which is our engagement with women, we have the Kuumba Institute which is our engagement with youth, we have our Movers and Groovers which is our engagement with the elders, and we have our Brothers Making a Change which is a developing group now which is our engagement with men. And we are teaching teachers how to appreciate and use culture more in their educational practice in the Institute for Cultural Education. We'll be doing that again this August/September [of 2011]. And so those are kind of our major programmatic areas.

And to that we add our ritual life, which includes the Holiday on the Boulevard festival; the Maafa [in July]; Lift Every Voice and Sing in January, which is our tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King. We kinda sat and looked around, and this is really a great way to look at how we kinda decide what we're gonna do. We sat and looked around and everybody was doing a commemoration of Dr. King for his birthday, and so it was like we don't need another one just cuz this institution came to exist, so we thought what could we do that we thought Dr. King would appreciate. And so we thought that creating an opportunity for people to come together -- all kinds of people -- to do something

together would be that. So Lift Every Voice and Sing became that. So Michaela does this huge community sing and performing vocalists come in and they share some of their favorite struggle and freedom songs and then they teach songs to the community. I think the first time we did it was 100, and now its two to three hundred people that come together to do it. And it's always fabulous and it's always some magical moments that get captured, and it's always a way in which I feel like the spirit kind of helps people to for that 3 hour period feel like what it could be like if we could work stuff out in the world. And so that's our tribute to Dr. King, an opportunity to try on peace and harmony for a little while and see if people could kind of get addicted to that. And so that's kinda how we make our decisions -- it's not templated [sic].

It's really about these values that have to do with how do you bring people together, how do you make culture a component of what is going on to the betterment of whatever it is that is being attempted. So we have Lift Every Voice, and Make a Joyful Noise Gospel Festival, when you put those things together that becomes like our skeleton and then it's interspersed with the things that we do with partners and all of that. And that we're really very place-based. So we're really very connected in the central city community. And so I'm on the board of the Central City Renaissance Alliance, and I'm on the board of the Workers and Businesses Association Club, *because people don't live in limbo, they live in a place. and you can't practice community-making if you're not doing it. and so you can't be kinda up somewhere, not connected, tryna connect with other people and not connected to self.*

So we are connected in Central City and spent a fair amount of time understanding that we are a contribution and Central City's a contribution to us. And so that's like home, and -- you know -- we gotta take care of the home front. And so we partner with all kinds of things: We were instrumental in helping to bring the Credit Union to the boulevard; and really being a part of almost all of the organizations that have come to exist certainly in the vicinity of where we are. And it's like, it's the way it's supposed to be: You're supposed to be a phone call away from your neighbor -- that kind of thing.

And that's part of why we got this property. The property was gotten because neither of us lived in Central City and we thought that that was not a good idea. We thought that though we lived at Ashé, that it wasn't sufficient. Because I own a home Uptown. And Doug said "well, I'm the one who's never at the house, you never at your house either *but* at least you own a house so *I'll* be the one to live here." So we bought this house [in Central City], and this is where he lived. And then he took sick -- by the time it was renovated he took sick and all. I think he got to live here about a week, a week and a half before he passed. And initially the places in the back were gonna be studios to work with the school, that was the initial plan. And then after the storm there was so much of a need for affordable housing, and the school had left -- now the school is coming back. So that's how long this has been working. You know, when we were doing this there was a school. The school was demolished, they're now working and building a new school. But we're gonna do 3 apartments in the back. And like I said, the bedroom that's here will be made available for some artists that are friends and [people] that wanna live in the community. Because a lot of this stuff -- this is the only area that's really *my* area -- but almost everything else is like a house and stuff and so it's not like an open and kinda regular place. And it's my residence, this is also where my main office is [...]

Ashé used to be my main office but I can't get anything done there. So I usually start off the day here, and I don't get over there until the afternoon. But that kinda gets us pretty current. You know, we were really working a lot on will and faith up until the storm. And then, because we were still standing, you know, people noticed us and thought what we were doing was helpful to a city that was in the kind of trouble that ours was in. And so we started getting national funding. And that really has been what has helped us to grow. That and our ability to be able to do events and earn there [...] and to a lesser extent and hopefully to a greater extent as time goes on to share our story with other people who are tryna figure their way out, and being able to be kind of a technical

assistance and consulting with people in other places” (Personal communication, June 11, 2011).

Mama Carol, in moving away from government, makes a statement that communities don’t simply change for the better thanks to better political representation and better legislation; instead, in her partnering with visual artist Douglas Redd, Mama Carol made clear that the culture of a community must be re-shaped in order to make room for social change. Toward that end, as of September 27, 2012, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center website states:

At Ashé our mission is to use art and culture to support community development. We are an an initiative of Efforts of Grace, Inc., a not-for-profit, 501(c)(3), organization that creates and supports programs, activities, and creative works emphasizing the contributions of people of African descent. Located in Central City, the Center provides opportunities for art presentations, community development, artist support, and the creation of partnerships that amplify outreach and support efforts.

During post-hurricane Katrina recovery, we have acted as a community based center for the activities of ReBuild New Orleans, and have taken a leadership role in implementing the strategy to repopulate the Central City neighborhood with its former residents and new like-minded neighbors.

We house a repertoire of original theater works that are available for touring, and provide sponsorship for many private, public, community-focused, and family oriented events.

And rather than using culture and the expressive arts towards a policy agenda, Mama Carol and her partner strove to create the space for their constituents and community members to solve their own problems without having to turn to local government. For example, when many parents voice concerns about the city’s underperforming public school system, Ashé’s response is to offer the Kuumba Institute, a supplementary educational program that might help students not only in their academic performance but also in their cultural awareness and sense of self. Or, when many families and individuals are struggling to make ends meet working low-wage, tourism-based, service-sector jobs in New Orleans, Ashé’s response is to hire Black men and

women to administer and execute its multitude of programs, rituals, and events at a living wage.

The mission of the Ashé and the framework in which it fits as a project of Efforts of Grace is really quite broad, “but it’s *intentionally* very broad,” says Mama Carol.

The intention, I think for Doug and I was essentially to create a world. Where, though everybody wouldn’t be in it -- so maybe a planet -- but that, for the people that were in it, that we had the capacity to be able to generate the support that they needed. And so our work, our partnerships and connections, and our earnings would really kinda move around and go from one hand to the other so to speak. And that as time went on the world would get bigger and bigger. And primarily because we don’t get to model this in the world, the world doesn’t change like that -- it’s too big. But you could really have a model and say, ‘well, you know, this works. it’s not the only thing that works, but, this works’ ” (ibid).

The intention of creating a *world* in which people might interact and learn and grow articulates with Black feminist understandings of intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989), simultaneity (Combahee River Collective 1986 [1978]), and interlocking matrices of oppression (Collins 1991), which call for a holistic approach to social justice work, movement-building work, and liberation struggle. Although the mission itself is broad, Ashé’s concept of community-building is not. Rather, Mama Carol supports a place-based sense of community and self because, as she puts it, “people don’t live in limbo, they live in a place. And you can’t practice community-making if you’re not doing it. And so you can’t be kinda up somewhere, not connected, tryna connect with other people and not connected to self.” Moreover, as Mama Carol explains,

if you wanna be in the places where the people are -- you know, folks don’t live in galleries; they live in their personal narrative with the challenges and struggles that there are. And for everybody who’s in a stressed place, if you wanna get their attention, have a solution. If you have a solution to their stress, then you got their attention. And so, you can’t do that for everybody. But you can get enough people together and if everybody feels like that’s what their job is, then you start this geometric progression of being able to essentially hear people, hear what their struggle is, and then have what you hear become a part of your storage of knowledge. And then the time comes where you get a chance to do something about it (personal communication June 11, 2011).

It's important that Mama Carol emphasizes hearing and listening to the struggles of the people she invites into her "world," because, like Junebug, Efforts of Grace and Ashé seek solutions to social problems by first beginning with the stories and narratives of oppressed peoples. This is a direct result of Mama Carol's having supported the Free Southern Theater, and having worked with John O'Neal at Junebug Productions. In fact, the Ashé Cultural Arts Center has hosted many a story circle facilitated by either John or Wendi O'Neal.

With this holistic philosophy serving as the foundation of their work, Mama Carol and her collaborator Douglas Redd housed their programs and ideas under the umbrella of the Ashé Cultural Arts Center. Mama Carol explains why the name *Ashé* was chosen when she says,

Ashé the word means like a divine force, the ability to make things happen. And I think we took that name because that's really where we wanna fit. We wanna see an opportunity and be able to take it and not be working outside of our mission. The mission is really about this synergistic energy that happens with community, culture, and the creator. And we really wanna be able to be true to our mission and also be pressed to constantly be looking for the new frontier in trying to really make it small and figure it out so that we can then whisper what we've learned to everybody and it won't be a mystery. Cuz often the new frontier has been handled like that in other worlds. And people walk out real fluent in this mysterious new place, and the rest of us going "what is this all about?" There's all kind of advantages in there, other people get to take 'em. Nobody tries to fit the advantage to us... (ibid).

Operating from a space of community engagement and empowerment, the Ashé has become a model for cultural organizing that stands in contrast to its neighbors at 1600 Oretha Castle Haley Boulevard. Rather than keeping their framework flexible enough to speak to the multiple needs of its constituents, organizations like Families and Friends of Louisiana's Incarcerated Children (FFLIC) and Safe Streets Strong Communities (SSSC) have taken a single issue-oriented approach to social justice work.

Both FFLIC and SSSC were established in the mid-to-late nineties by Black people whose families and/or friends had been targets of police terrorism and the criminal injustice system. In the case of SSSC, many of its staff in addition to its members has seen their loved ones murdered by police. While FFLIC and SSSC have articulated in their missions and core principles an understanding of the fundamental injustice of the prison industrial complex, these organizations in attempting to move a specific policy agenda have demonstrated a faith and a willingness to operate within the political system. Ashé on the other hand, seemingly eschews the political system in favor of building a strong Black institution capable of providing living-wage jobs, affordable housing, and supplementary education, in addition to community rituals, celebrations, and events. Because Ashé has been able to meet immediate needs in addition to the need for emotional support, understanding and camaraderie, it has been able to attract a larger number of people to it than have FFLIC and SSSC.

Ashé possesses the most social capital of any Black-led institutions on OC Haley Boulevard in that they have intentionally nurtured and cultivated a strong network of groups and individuals who are interested in Afro-diasporic art and culture, sustainable community building, and just urban revitalization. Indeed, in casting their net wide, Ashé has been able to grow a substantial network of supporters and allies. And because of the underlying Black feminist principles of holistic movement-building which guide Efforts of Grace, and the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, the institution has been able to accumulate the immense social and political capital necessary to grow and synthesize many disparate networks into one. While it would seem that New Orleans' good old boys system – premised as it is on reputation and nepotism – would keep women entrepreneurs from

achieving prominence, in fact, the women of Ashé and Gris Gris Lab have been able to use their knowledge of that system to their advantage.

The Gris Gris Lab

The Gris Gris Lab looks like any other shotgun double on the street.



Figure 14: Gris Gris Lab on Brainard Street.

It sits in between other houses of the sort on Brainard Street in Central City, just two blocks north of St. Charles with its famous streetcars and opulent mansions. Perhaps the only difference I could detect when I first visited the Gris Gris Lab was its lovely front garden, fragrant with basil and bursting with color. Entering through the 2247 side of the grey double one walks into a square room with white walls and wood floors. On these walls, as well as on any other walls in the Gris Gris Lab, grace traveling exhibits, sometimes painting and collage, sometimes photography. Through the sliding wooden doors, is the bright red kitchen – lacking any of the usual kitchen appliances – in which sit a long folding table and chairs. There is also a corner of the kitchen called the

“apothecary”: a set of shelves boasting ritual and medicinal herbs. Beyond the kitchen is a private room with a full bathroom; the private room can be entered from the side of the house, allowing a measure of privacy for the artists in residence who pass through the space.

Entering through the 2245 side of the grey double one confronts two square rooms with creaky wood floors and buzzing AC window units. Directly behind these boxy exhibition parlors, there is a room with intense turquoise walls known as the meditation room; this is the room in which, with the lights dimmed, Ms. Hamilton administers her healing services such as reiki, massage or acupuncture. Adjoining the meditation room is another full bathroom and the Gris Gris Lab back office. Welcoming clients and visitors to this expansive space in the first room sits a small table with fresh flowers, cards and stone with inspirational words carved into them like “hope” or “faith.” The table also offers a book into which visitors and patrons sign their names and email addresses, as well as Gris Gris Lab business cards with the contact information for Gia M. Hamilton, its Founding Artistic Director. On the wall, next to shelves holding votive candles is her photo accompanied by a quirky biography in which she mentions her experiences living on “planet Brooklyn.”

After working in the corporate and non-profit worlds in New York City, as well as the world of arts education, Gia Hamilton returned to her hometown in 2009. She tells the following story about the attendant culture shock that greeted her upon arrival:

I was just telling someone today my parents were very very very different. My mother definitely grew up as a part of aristocrat, creole society; went to boarding school in VA, learned french, very debutante. Stuff that's so insane it's like how are you my mother? And my father grew up in Hollygrove, Gerttown area. And those 2 worlds [mom's and dad's] did not mix. If my father hadn't have been the head of his class in math, and my mother's uncle was his teacher and said “oh this young man is blah blah blah”

[...] If not for that, yall would not have been at the same place at the same time *ever*. And it's crazy cuz Heidi and I were just talking about this play, this production,

“Creole Mafia” that Junebug is producing, and how there was this club [the autocrat on st. bernard] I can’t recall the name right now, but there’s so many clubs around here that had the brown paper bag test. So it’s just like literally my father and my mother would talk about going out and not both being able to get into the same place, which is just insane to me because that has never been my experience. I have never participated in that experience here in New Orleans. But when I see it, it’s from a very distant place where I’m like wow I can’t believe that kinda stuff still happens here. And it’s because there are good things about tradition that ground people and help people feel secure; and then there’s the crazy shit about tradition where *that* doesn’t work, or *this* isn’t serving people; why is this still going on?

[...] You know, I was in NY for like 13 years, and I traveled a lot so NY was *home* to me -- and it still is -- but NY was home to me for a long time. I had traveled to Central America, South America, the Caribbean, Africa, parts of Europe so it was like I feel like I have this perspective of like globally Black people, people in the Diaspora. And I moved back to my *own home* and it’s like I’m confused, how is this the case. and I’ll give you an example: I mean one of the first couple of days I’m walking around and I’m like ok I need to get stuff for the house... I go to Home Depot and there’s this woman walking around Home Depot and she’s barking out these orders and you don’t see anybody right behind her or around her and maybe a couple of feet behind her there’s this old, dark-skinned man who’s clearly a carpenter. And his response -- cuz I stopped to watch them -- and his response to her was the averted eyes, which I’ve seen in a couple of places like Haiti and Brazil where it’s like I can’t even, I don’t even get to make eye contact with you. And just her complete comfort around the idea that this person is here to do whatever I say... I was just like *shit*.

[...] This was like a couple of days, maybe 5 or 6 days, and I was like what am I doing here? Ancestors were like just trust. Because this is definitely that place. It will call you here, it will either chew you up and spit you out literally, or it will claim you and then you’re a child of New Orleans forever. And even when you leave, you will still have those ties to the city... So *I* came back kicking and screaming. Like no, *why* am I coming back? What am I doing? I don’t understand this. You know, my grandmother’s here, my mother, my father moved back; and we have land here and in Vacherie so it’s like I was being called back but I was just like this is insane (Personal communication, December 2010).

When she returned to New Orleans with her three sons in tow, Ms. Hamilton immediately made the connection between the racial dynamics in New Orleans, Brazil and Haiti – all locales which struggle with how to equitably move forward in order to divorce themselves from their brutal and oppressive colonial pasts. Interestingly, Ms. Hamilton links New Orleans with places known for their African-derived religious practices, and this linkage is honored in the name that she chose for her business: Gris Gris (pronounced Gree-Gree) is a Senegambian word meaning “magic.” At the height of Voodoo practice in New Orleans, believers were said to wear gris gris around their necks, small amulets which carried the power to protect its wearers from harm or the evil eye. Today color-

coded gris gris promising its wearer success in finances, romance, or education are usually sold in tourist traps throughout the French Quarter. It is clear that the concept of “magic” animates her work, as Hamilton talks about being “called” to New Orleans by the “ancestors.”

Ms. Hamilton updates the loaded spiritual concept for today when she talks about the Gris Gris Lab being an international healing space, and a place for experimenting with “social magic.” Hamilton defines Gris Gris Lab as a “house of social magic” because it is a space and a set of consulting services which allows people to manifest their desires and engage in creative problem-solving. Indeed, as of May 3, 2012, the Gris Gris Lab website states that social magic “is a process by which clients are able to free themselves from challenges, play with their problems, and ultimately identify an authentic way of being in their personal and professional lives.” Importantly, Ms. Hamilton herself has been empowered by her own willingness to engage in creative problem-solving and in social magic. She talks about the philosophy and genesis of the Gris Gris Lab as emanating from her own needs as well as desires:

So Gris Gris Lab in a very, I wanna say, passive way doesn’t fight against that but really embraces discovery and experimentation, and tries to honor many different ways of approaching problems or what we would call challenges and really thinking about ways to create support systems and support networks for people who want to in some ways leave the matrix. And so it’s like when you leave the matrix then where do you go? You know, you need other people otherwise you seem like an oddball in normal society; so you need a group of people who are like ‘oh yeah, it’s not weird that X, Y, and Z happened or that you feel like this.’ And I feel like as I speak and as I talk to people as I go forward it’s definitely different every time I talk about it because it’s always fluid and changing. But at its core, Gris Gris Lab... really is an extension of my own healing process, my own exiting of the matrix, my own trials and errors like individually and collectively with other people; and my own convictions around revolution and that being an action. So in terms of the mission, the mission is really to serve as a healing space in essence for people coming out of the matrix. You know, um, how do we relearn, rethink? (Gia Hamilton. Personal communication, October 22, 2010).

She continues, saying:

Being the Founding Director, I have to look at my own needs first. And so a lot of what happens here is because it’s a need or desire of mine and I know that it’s something that

other people need or want or are attracted to. For instance, the healing work is something that's important to me. And it's really broad, it comes in a bunch of different ways. But the way I do it that's most concrete is by doing healing sessions with people like reiki and acupuncture, massage, and spiritual counseling for people and then opening that up to the community and having a heal-a-long where every Thursday you can come and get acupuncture, come and get massage, come and get services for really nominal prices, like sliding-scale. What it does for me as a healer is remind me that I have to have these services done, but it also gives me a direct outlet to the people in my community that I wanna work with.

[...] I feel like everything that I do involves some sort of healing work. Like if it's a touch to someone or just listening to them, or just having tea, I feel like when you interact with people like that it reminds you that we're human, and that a lot of this other stuff doesn't really exist, it's not really real: what's happening in that moment is real. So that's one aspect. And then we have urban agriculture and it's like: food is your medicine, right? So it taps into the healing work. What you put in your body is important, and our food is something that we engage in every day when we're not fasting. And if we don't actually think about where our food comes from, think about who grows it and how it's distributed and who gets access to what, then we're really kinda setting ourselves up for what we see happening now, which is injustice. We see food deserts where we have whole communities, like in my neighborhood, where there's no grocery store; there's corner stores and nothing is fresh and people can't get anything that they really need, or they don't even know what they really need because they never had access to it.

Community gardening has always been big here and my parents have always had gardens and I come from a line of healers and stewards of the earth and I *think* I am just carrying the torch of my great grandfather and my grandmother and continuing the work that they were doing. And where the art comes in is just that I'm a visual artist and I work with metal and wood and fabric and fiber primarily doing 3d work. And I think art is infused into everything that I do. All of this is about integration, so like how I express myself and the fact that a healer doesn't need to wear a mumu and a gele, but so you'll see me wearing stiletto heels and whatever. Whatever outfit and I can still be doing the work that I need to be doing. Expressing self. And like I said it's the intersection of all those things. For me, in African thought and cosmology there aren't these compartmentalized areas of life. Everything is integrated, everything affects everything else.

And so that's really how I see life, and that's really how I try to fuse things together. It's just all a part of this large continuum; so if I'm cooking it can very well be an art project, depending on what I choose to cook and how I present it [...] and it can be healing because if I'm infusing love vibrations in with that food then it's this complete, holistic thing by the time I end up serving it. And anyone of these things can be tied into something else. So my big goal is just to have a safe space where people come and they're able to purchase things that they need, they're able to get services that they need, they're able to make connections with people that they need to make connections with, and it's done in a way that allows all of us to act in our highest selves on a regular basis.

[...] I guess that's a couple hundred people [who participate personally and directly with Gris Gris Lab in some way]. I feel like I have contact with maybe 2,000 people in some way, shape, or form throughout the year. Like yeah let's do this or let's connect in this way, this is info specifically for you that you need to use in this way as a resource or whatever. I feel like it's a broad number of people but I don't necessarily have regular contact with them (Personal communication, December 2010).

Similar to the Ashé Center but much smaller in scale, it would seem that Ms. Hamilton has taken a page from her Central City neighbor's notebook in attempting to create a world wherein folks can gather, socialize and engage in healing rituals. In both instances

the mission is broad and takes into account the needs of surrounding communities. Black feminist scholars bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins discuss the activist work of Black women as being holistic in nature, and placing emphasis on the entire community and its needs (1984: 1991) given that women's experiences are informed by factors such as race, class, and nation in addition to gender and sexuality. Following the logic of Black feminism, both Mama Carol and Ms. Hamilton are engaged in feminist movement, i.e. labor that resists the broad implications and consequences of the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchal matrix of oppression. This holistic standpoint is quite different from the one espoused by the male-led Junebug Productions in which the singular tool of theater is used to agitate its audience. Ms. Hamilton talks openly about the nature and politics at play in the expansive vision which drives her work with Gris Gris Lab:

[...] my work with Gris Gris Lab [...] from the beginning has always been an expansive process. And so, with that said, it's not a clean cut or linear process. And I can say, you know again, this is not to say that the process is perfect, it's certainly not perfect but what it is is a living organic way to approach [...] Revolution. Which is, that you can't stay in theory with revolution, that's for me only a small, very small component of bringing about revolution or revolutionary change which is one of my focuses. And I mean that on a personal level, family level, community level, societal level. And so that process is about in some ways breaking away from and identifying and having an awareness of what exists, what you are currently involved in and how it's embedded in every single thing that you do. So it's sort of like using 12 step when you say, you know: 'My name is Gia and I'm an alcoholic.' Well, my name is Gia and I'm a product of colonial, patriarchal, white racist thought. And that, in fact, affects every single thing that I do. And in order for me to actually begin to break away from that and have a sense of identity and purpose, like divine purpose, I have to really look at things from another lens. And there are some ways that have been successfully implemented from our ancestors, from people of color who've been colonized, ways that people have done it: through our art, through the practice of culture, through the practice of ritual, through spirituality people are actually able to see things with a different filter because they're seeing it from an expansive point of view, *not* a very linear point of view. So when we're able to do that, then it becomes [...] this vision, this mission statement (Gia Hamilton. Personal communication, October 22, 2010).

Gris Gris Lab is a space which manifests a clear intention to change the culture of how people relate and interact with one another. Rather than allowing individualism and

competition to guide its ethos, people are encouraged “to act in their highest selves,” or to put it more plainly people are encouraged to act with love, compassion and sincerity towards one another. By emphasizing indigenous cultural practices, art forms, and healing rituals, the Gris Gris Lab aims to create small-scale, revolutionary social change as it supports people in seeing things “with a different filter” or “an expansive point of view.” For example, Gris Gris Lab gathers people together around food, a common denominator for all; however, rather than offering the usual uncritical celebration of “soul food,” Hamilton challenges folks to think critically about issues of nutrition and food access, catalyzing changes in lifestyle and foodways. The Ashé Cultural Arts Center also provides a model for revolutionary community building which aims to change the culture in which people devalue all things African. For example, with its Kuumba Institute similarly shifts the paradigm by challenging the notion that an active interest in learning is somehow “acting white,” by teaching students of African descent to identify with the spiritual, scientific, architectural, linguistic, and philosophical legacies of Africa thereby complicating the narrative which says that Black people excel solely in music, dance, and athletics.

While there are many similarities in the visions and goals guiding Ashé and Gris Gris Lab, there are also many differences between the two. The starkest contrast can be found in the structure of the organizations: Ashé is the principal – and most expansive – project of Efforts of Grace, a non-profit entity, while Gris Gris Lab is a for-profit business. Whereas Ashé attracts most of its funding from the philanthropic world and the public sector, Gris Gris Lab works to turn a profit gleaned largely from memberships and consulting contracts.

A youthful, petite and vivacious woman, Ms. Hamilton capitalizes upon the male gaze by playing to the egos and desires of white men in positions of power – namely the judges of the city-wide entrepreneurship contests in which she’s been competing for financial resources, valuable business consulting and mentorship, as well as unparalleled networking with colleagues and potential investors.



Figure 15: Gia M. Hamilton giving a presentation.

By playing to stereotypes about Black people and women which characterize both groups as child-like and in need of paternalistic guidance, and then turning those stereotypes on their heads, Ms. Hamilton has been able to pick up valuable skills in making “the pitch,” in refining her business model, and in marketing and promoting her brand; she has also won tangible forms of capital such as equipment and money. On the other hand, Mama Carol has capitalized upon that same totalizing gaze by welcoming would-be white patrons and making them feel comfortable supporting Ashé’s endeavors. Ms. Hamilton sets herself apart from the more mystical, asexualized image of an African healer when she talks about how a healer “doesn’t need to wear a mumu or a gele,” traditional African

garb, but rather can wear “whatever outfit” even sexy (by Western standards) “stilettto heels.”

Although Ms. Hamilton has been characterized as innovative and trailblazing, she is simply a successor following in a long tradition of African women throughout the Diaspora historically, and within New Orleans more immediately who have shaped and dominated the cultural economy. In many ways Ms. Hamilton has built upon the models created not only by Mama Carol with Ashé, but also by Mama Vera with the Community Book Center.

The Community Book Center

The Community Book Center is located on Bayou Road in a part of town in which the boundaries of the Creole Seventh Ward overlap with those of Mid-City and the Fairgrounds neighborhood. It is a part of town that is somewhat mixed, but has retained its Black majority – at least for now. The Community Book Center has large storefront windows in which you will see colorful, if not chaotic displays of local artwork, African-American themed comic books, and best-selling novels penned by Black authors. The glass doors are so papered over with flyers that there remains hardly any transparent surface area. Inside the book store is a wide and large room with books sectioned as follows: children’s, young adult, science and religion, history, and classics.

Mama Vera started the community book center in the home she lived in with her aging parents in the 9th Ward. As a substitute teacher for the public schools, she observed that there were no books that were assigned on the curriculum in which the protagonists looked like the majority student population. So when she’d go in for the

day, she'd promise the students who performed well that in the latter half of the day she'd give them a treat. Well, they thought the treat would be junk food or candy, but when she pulled out her books the students were captivated to see their own images reflected back at them on the page. Word got around the school that her classes were engaging the students in innovative ways and she earned herself a good reputation with the other teachers and the administrators. Soon they were asking to borrow her books. Rather than risk losing the books in her own personal collection, she invested \$300 and ordered 13 books – mostly children's books, but also *The Color Purple*, which was a best seller in 1983.

With the money she made from selling the original order, Mama Vera was able to place another, even larger order. Out of a desire to pass along the information, she would often sell books to her customers for cheaper than it cost for her to buy them. After building up a following, she felt unsafe having so many unknown people coming into the house where she and her elderly parents were living. So she negotiated with the owners of a gift shop on Poland Avenue – not far from the industrial canal – to have a book rack in their store. That was going along ok, and then one day as she was leaving the Jazz and Heritage Foundation on Rampart Street, having applied for a position as the Director of the African Market at Jazz Fest, she discovered a small storefront on Ursulines that was for sale. Mama Vera did a little research and found that the building was willing to rent.

She spent 7 years in the storefront on Ursulines and St. Claude a few blocks away from her present location. Mama Vera recalled the space was owned by a racist white landlord. The place had no air-conditioning and no heat! She says she can't remember how they survived. While they had established roots in the Treme neighborhood, Mama

Vera really wanted to move to “front street” to gain more visibility and revenue for her business. So they rented a place on Broad Street just off of Canal. But it had terrible parking. People often told her about how they “passed by the store” but couldn’t find a place to park so they could come in. For about 7 years they rented on Broad Street; during that time the property had been sold to a Vietnamese man who owned multiple properties in the Mid-City. She said he was really more of a slum lord. It made her think about the concept of Kugichagulia (self-determination) and whether they were going to keep on talking it or whether they were going to finally walk it. Around the time of the bookstore’s 20th anniversary, Mama Vera decided it was time to buy. She says something that the slumlord did really set her off and that was it. So she looked at a property on Broad and Cleveland with an asking price of damn near half-a-million dollars. She then looked at a house on Bayou Road. As she was leaving the house, her friend, and owner of the property which is now the Community Book Center, asked her what she was doing and told her that she was looking to sell her building as well. It was an auspicious moment (Vera Warren. Personal communication. October 28, 2010).

Not long thereafter, in 2003, the Book Center moved to Bayou Road. They rented the upstairs apartment to artists, authors, and social justice groups visiting from out of town as a means to earn increased revenue. After Katrina, the apartment sat empty. By 2010 they finally had rented the apartment to a tenant. Mama Vera says she lost practically everything with Katrina. Even though she had insurance, it wasn’t enough to cover her losses and rebuild. And even now with all the maintenance and repairs it’s easy to get behind. The challenge is to pay for adequate insurance which can sometimes be in excess of six thousand dollars annually.

The Community Book Center in its Bayou Road location is a well-respected community institution because in addition to books it sells music and visual art created by local artists, Afrocentric garb, and scented oils; but even beyond the products that the Book Center sells, it provides a space for people to come and gather, socialize and learn.

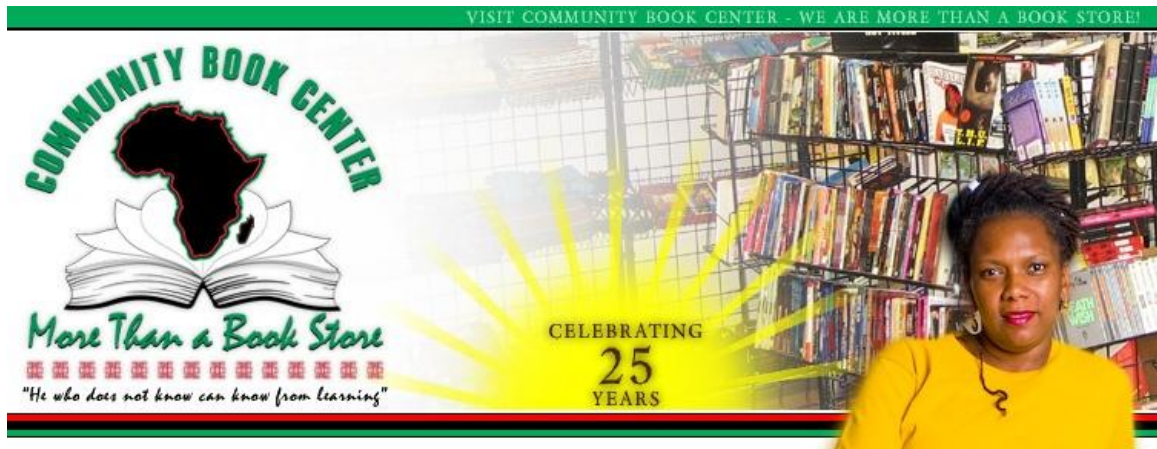


Figure 16: Vera Warren, Founder of the Community Book Center – more than a bookstore.

For example, local scholars have given lectures and local authors have read from their works there. The Community Book Center was a main drop-off center at which I'd often leave marketing materials for Junebug Productions theater projects precisely because it houses activities that are "centered on community consciousness and awareness"; Mama Vera says that the activities were initially "African-centered but we began to collaborate with other people of color and poor people to support just causes [...]" Particularly, post-Katrina we've grown to be a meeting space because it is a large space to host events. So the broader community began coming to us for that service" (Personal communication October 28, 2010). In the future, Mama Vera says

we would like to see more youth-centered programming (k-12)... to help build literacy, and to help build and improve social and cultural skills and development; bringing children's authors to have discussions about their books; rites of passage programs to help prepare young people for the transition from childhood to adulthood (ibid).

While the Community Book Center was not always located on Bayou Road, it is fitting that it would eventually wind up there. Bayou Road is an historic locale. In 1699 the Indigenous people of the region showed the French-Canadian explorers the portage route they used between the Gulf of Mexico and the Mississippi River; this would later become Bayou Road, which acted as the main transportation between the Bayou and the fledgling city of New Orleans until 1794. In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, Bayou Road was home to Dr. John, a man who came from present-day Senegal. Dr. John, for whom the contemporary local (white) musician is named, worked closely with Marie Laveau in her spiritual practice; and they were both known to frequent Congo Square.

The Community Book Center is not the only unapologetically Black business and social space on Bayou Road: Occupying that same block are the King and Queen Emporium where you can buy African black soap, incense and oils; Beauty on da Bayou, a beauty salon specializing in chemical-free haircare; the Coco Hut, a small restaurant serving pan-Caribbean fare; and the Red Star Gallery, a small gallery showcasing the works of local, Black visual artists. Certain spaces just lend themselves to certain energies, and Bayou Road is one place in the city where the energy is decidedly conscious, decidedly cosmopolitan, and decidedly collective. For this reason, Bayou Road and the Community Book Center – as well as the Ashé Cultural Arts Center – are usually on the list of must-see places for the Black heritage tourist to New Orleans.

At the Community Book Center, folks really feel a sense of collective ownership. And it's not just because they are spending money there. It's because it is a space that encourages a relaxed sense of community. You don't have to be there for a specific reason, and you don't even have to *buy* anything in order to be welcome. For example:

One afternoon in late September of 2010, I went into the Community Book Center to hang out until my hair appointment next door at Beauty on da Bayou. I took a seat on the couch and Mama Jennifer [the store manager] turns on the TV before she heads to the kitchen to fix a plate for herself and her grown up son. Returning to the table with plates in hand, Mama Jennifer asks me if I'm hungry. I tell her no thank you, I just became a vegetarian and I ate before I came out; to this she replies "we got greens ain't got no meat in em, sweet potatoes ain't got no meat in em." All right, I say as I make my way to the back to make a plate. When I return to the couch, the lady from the Coco Hut a few doors down is just leaving, having dropped by to bring Mama Jennifer some fried plantains from her kitchen to taste. I hadn't happened to be at the Book Center on a designated food-sharing day, that's just how they do business.

The Community Book Center is a space where Black consciousness is nurtured, cultivated, and expressed. I take my definition of consciousness from Mr. Randolph Scott, a resident of the fairgrounds area of the Seventh Ward not far from the Community Book Center on Bayou Road. An active member of the SUNO Alumni Association, and comrade of Mr. Waters and Mr. Suber, he defines consciousness as a critical understanding of the reality of one's condition (Randolph Scott. Personal communication. September 30, 2010). Black consciousness therefore, by extension, must be a critical understanding of the racial politics which structure and inform the reality of one's condition. Consciousness-raising, as a political activity grows out of what Anthropologist John Langston Gwaltney calls "core Black culture," i.e. the mainstream of Black culture and society in the U.S. which reflects "the astonishing reality of their

civil, principled survival in spite of the weight of empire that rests upon their backs”

(1980: xxii). Gwaltney asserts that

“core Black culture has traditionally esteemed good talk and profound dialogue. It has sustained a variety of forms of oral discourse from ‘fending and proving -- the art of clandestine theological exegesis practiced by slaves -- to non-veracious forms, such as woofing and sounding. Black culture proceeds upon the premise that ‘the truth is the light,’ but it is equally aware that ‘the truth is a razor’” (ibid xxv).

The Community Book Center is one space which inspires its visitors to continue their processes of self-discovery and consciousness-raising because it offers the information and ingredients to learn more about and to change one’s present condition. If this information cannot be found in a book, it can be shared through dialogue and conversation; there are always people willing to deconstruct with you the structural impediments to liberation, and offer tools and tactics for how one must topple them.

Like the Ashé and the Gris Gris Lab, the Community Book Center is a cosmopolitan place. I largely borrow from Kwame Appiah’s use of the term as comprised of two ideals, “universal concern and respect for legitimate difference” (Appiah 2006: xv). African Studies scholar Jean Francois Bayart has argued that Africans have a long history of extraversion (Bayart 2000); the African origin of the “world citizen” as discussed by French literary scholar Celia Sadai (2007) persuasively demonstrates that Africans have long been proponents of a cosmopolitan worldview. Leaders of the Ashé, Gris Gris Lab, and Community Book Center as well as their constituents and patrons are true world citizens who call upon a range of cultural elements when constructing their identities, implementing programs, stocking their shelves, or making purchases. The Community Book Center, in addition to specializing in books authored by people of the African Diaspora, carries books by American Indian authors covering their culture and history, and bilingual books in Spanish and English.

The Gris Gris Lab offers a range of traditional healing services originating in Japan (reiki) and China (acupuncture); rituals drawing from Ifá and Vodou cosmologies; and land stewardship practices passed down from her great-grandparents. Ashé evinces a cosmopolitan concern for difference in its mission to support artists from various parts of the African Diaspora and building upon various aesthetic traditions. In addition to the cosmopolitanism of their artistic offerings, I have attended story circles at Ashé centered around racial healing and reconciliation, as well as lectures on the historical relationships between Black folks and Native Americans which inform contemporary artistic and spiritual practices in New Orleans.

Conclusion

In the hands of the Black women discussed above, art and culture are tools with which to communicate, and to organize; art and culture also act as commodities to be traded and exchanged for monetary gain. While I have previously discussed the roles that art and culture play in the gentrification process, it becomes clear that art and culture are in themselves empty signifiers until they are imbued with meaning. For example, former Lt. Governor Mitch Landrieu saw in art and culture an economic opportunity for the State, while Mama Carol and Gia Hamilton saw in art and culture ways to fulfill their own needs as well as those of their surrounding communities. Where the city's over-dependence on the tourism industry has engendered, and in many ways dramatized, a false calculus of "disappearance and exhibition," so too has this dichotomy been reproduced by the city's proliferation of NGOs.

The women discussed above and the institutions they've created have endeavored to resist the disappearance of Black culture bearers and their context(s) for cultural production. Instead, by tying art and culture to community rebuilding *and* economic development, places like Ashé, Gris Gris Lab, and the Community Book Center demand recognition as well as compensation, thereby modeling a type of resistance which neither requires that all activists live like ascetic monks, nor that all artists be starving. So far, these institutions have been able to count on support not only from the grassroots, but also from the State, as participants in the Cultural Districts program. While their sources of funding differentiate Ashé, Gris Gris Lab, and the Community Book Center from institutions like Junebug Productions, their social entrepreneurial, fee-for-service business models also help to defray the costs of community rebuilding.

I have previously introduced the notion of cultural organizing as the strategic use of art and culture to move policy. In my discussion of Junebug Productions I took a looser definition of cultural organizing as the use of art – in this case theater – to raise consciousness through storytelling and dialogue. In this chapter I have introduced yet another dimension to the concept of cultural organizing. The Ashé Cultural Arts Center and the Gris Gris Lab have placed art and culture at the center of their community building efforts. The Community Book Center has also placed culture at the center of their efforts but they have done so primarily by creating learning environments in which Black people do not have to check their cultural baggage at the door as opposed to the other institutions which quite literally exhibit visual art in addition to their extensive programming. However, each institution has created a world in which folks are aided and supported in “leaving the matrix” of white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy.

Without the bold rhetoric and brightly colored dashikis, Mama Carol, Mama Vera and Gia Hamilton are, nonetheless, participating in carrying on the legacy of the Black Power movement. By creating institutions in which Black men, women and children are invited to better themselves, imagine their own liberation, and determine their own destinies, the Ashé, and the Gris Gris Lab, in particular, are moving toward models which actively attempt to innovate aspects of the total institution in that that they are social hybrids: “part residential community, part formal organization” (Goffman 1990: 22).

The models of Cultural Organizing offered by the Ashé Cultural Arts Center, the Gris Gris Lab and the Community Book Center are built largely around consciousness-raising which articulates with Junebug’s model of using theater and storytelling to raise the level of critical thinking in its audiences; the Community Book Center provides patrons with access to cultural information about heritage, while providing the space for many organizations or informal gatherings to plan for, strategize or engage in the necessary work of racial uplift. Additionally, Gris Gris Lab and Ashé are also places where you can go for much-needed services whether healing or spiritual or practical, e.g. childcare, or affordable housing. Rather than simply raising issues, Gris Gris Lab’s model includes providing the tools and resources for one to safely exit the matrix. For example, if you take Ms. Hamilton’s “Food Justice” course, you will not only learn about issues of access and nutrition, you will learn how to grow your own micro greens, you will have the option to purchase dietary supplements right there on the spot, *and* you will be given maps and schedules for local farmers’ markets.

The models of community building detailed above also differ from Junebug in that while the three institutions discussed in this chapter center a nuanced and inclusive

concept of Black culture, they also incorporate other cultural and spiritual practices. The Gris Gris Lab, for example, boldly calls itself an “international healing arts space,” thereby announcing its cosmopolitanism. Ashé Cultural Arts Center exhibits a cosmopolitan concern for all things African in its multifaceted window displays and diverse cultural programming which includes African mythology, Hip Hop dance and Spanish and Portuguese classes. The Community Book Center features poetry and prose from throughout the Diaspora and is branching out into other world literatures. The institutions discussed in this chapter go beyond Junebug’s mission to support “the oppressed and exploited” in the “Black Belt South;” certainly they do, however, by creating worlds in which Black culture is celebrated for its diversity, complexity, and value – wherein solutions to pressing and sometimes mundane problems are made available, the Ashé, Gris Gris Lab and Community Book Center attract the people they aim to support, thereby strengthening community relations.

LMAAH: Visualizing Black culture, consciousness, and community

Shortly after I joined the board of the Louisiana Museum for African American History (LMAAH) in the summer of 2010, I began to play a supporting role in organizing lectures and events designed to raise its public profile in New Orleans. One of the more memorable and well attended events took place in October 2010 at the St. James AME Church in Mid-City. Established in 1844, St. James AME is a living African-American historic site: during the Civil War the church was a recruiting station for the Union to enlist Black troops. It was only natural that LMAAH would partner with this great and historic institution to continue the work of the Black freedom struggle.

On October 12, 2010, forty-four people came out to St. James AME Church to learn about efforts to save the S.W. Green House. A mixed crowd of Black and white attendees, some of LMAAH's guests had travelled from as far away as Vacherie (some 40 miles north of New Orleans) to hear the news. S.W. Green had once been a prominent man in New Orleans' African American community. Smith Wendell Green was born to parents who had once been enslaved, but he died a very wealthy man. His house, built in the 1920s was the largest home built by a Black person in all of Louisiana. By 2010, however, the house had become a forgotten and endangered landmark; the local government along with private citizens and businesses who stand to profit wanted to bulldoze the entire neighborhood – and the S.W. Green house along with it – to make way for the LSU/VA medical corridor.

Because Kenneth Bryant, the Black architect who first discovered the S.W. Green House lives and works in NYC and couldn't get to New Orleans to join us for the public

forum, he sent a short video in which he recounts how he came upon the house, and details some of its more fascinating architectural elements. The streaming video, which Bryant had sent via email and then later had to convince a tech person at Tulane to download and bring to the forum, had many technical difficulties with frequent interruptions in sound. But despite difficulties, people sat rapt in their chairs, straining to hear and to understand the importance of the site. In the film, Bryant calls urban renewal “urban removal” and brings attention to the fact that urban renewal has disproportionately destroyed Black heritage sites.

After the video was shown, Kathe Hambrick, director of the River Road African American Museum in Donaldsonville, Louisiana, rose to speak. She stressed the importance of benevolent and mutual aid societies to Black community sustainability and reminded the audience that these societies were what African Americans had used to pull themselves up from slavery to become “productive citizens.” Recently elected the President of the Association of African American Museums (AAAM), Mrs. Hambrick reminded the audience that it was not until 1962 in Chicago that Dr. Margaret Burroughs founded the first African American museum.

At the time, I did not know who Dr. Burroughs was, nor was I aware of the role she had played in encouraging the formation of the museum on whose board I now sat. Appropriating the museum model as Dr. Burroughs had done, Mr. Waters and Mrs. Hambrick hoped to build contemporary African-American organizations which might act as advocacy groups, resource-sharing institutions, and information clearing-houses much as the historic benevolent and mutual aid societies once had; it became clear to me at this and other events that LMAAH as an institution wanted to be more than simply a place to

display documents and exhibit photographs. However, hindered by a lack of professional expertise, and obstructed by its slow adoption of new technologies, LMAAH was facing some of the same institutional challenges as Junebug Productions as it attempted to translate movement-building successes into organizational sustainability.



Figure 17: Leon A. Waters, Hari Jones, and Kathe Hambrick (L-R) taking an African American history tour in the River Parishes

Museums, and the way we see things

We have seen thus far how Black activists, artists and entrepreneurs in New Orleans have sought to use culture as a tool for community organizing. This is certainly true of the institution that is the focus of this chapter: the museum. Museums, of course, developed as a distinctly European way to make sense of and create order in the world, one that gained momentum during the Enlightenment and thereafter. More than merely

an innocent collection of objects and images, museums always produce knowledge in the very process of displaying it:

Any museum or exhibition is, in effect, a statement of position. It is a theory: a suggested way of seeing the world. And, like any theory, it may offer insight and illumination. At the same time, it contains certain assumptions, speaks to some matters and ignores others, and is intimately bound up with -- and capable of affecting -- broader social and cultural relations (Macdonald & Fyfe 1996: 14).

Museums tell stories which encourage their audiences to identify themselves in relation to a specific time and place. With the use of technology, these stories are made real – museum visitors can see, hear, and feel the descriptive elements of the stories told – thanks to the innovative display and interpretation of a museum’s collection. Museums, therefore, “have acted not simply as the embodiment of theoretical ideas, but also as part of the visualizing technology through which such ideas were formed” (ibid 7).

Following historical trends in European museology, museums all over the world have begun to evince a standard socio-political function: first, by forging unique and distinctive national cultures out of a mosaic of competing ethnicities and empires; second, by promoting the “national idea” (ibid 33) through museum collections and circulating the idea in print amongst the literate bourgeoisie; and finally, by becoming “symbols of the state, and not only the nation” (ibid 34). Of course,

the contradictory, ambivalent, position which museums are in makes them key cultural loci of our times. Through their displays and their day-to-day operations they inevitably raise questions about knowledge and power, about identity and difference, and about permanence and transience. Precisely because they have become global symbols through which status and community are expressed, they are subject to appropriation and the struggle for ownership (ibid 2).

African American museums, as Third World institutions to be found embedded within First World nation-states, take up the task of first legitimizing, and then making Black history and culture legible to wider audiences.

The central roles and functions of ‘Third World’ cultural-historical museums can also be viewed in this fashion. According to the International Council of Museums (ICOM),

which is the most important forum for 'Third World' museology, their role is to strengthen cultural identity and consciousness in the face of rapid and world-wide cultural change; to strengthen national identity within an internationalized system of states; and to make use of the educational potential in the context of development. These functional definitions touch directly upon questions of the world political order (ibid 22-23).

An unspoken aspect of the African American museum's mission is to "educate their target audience on the universality of the African American story" (Williams & Worth 2007: 6). However, in order to portray the African American story as universal, African American cultural institutions must first demonstrate what that story is. In other words, African American cultural institutions, and museums especially must define for themselves "exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing [their] group with prestige and common purpose" (Lowenthal 1996: 128). This is the central task of what has come to be known as the heritage movement. "Many of the most forceful and visible expressions of the past are fueled by the so-called heritage movement, which is becoming a worldwide concern, born of an uneasy combination of national ideology, ethnic politics, and tourist industry interests" (Olwig 1999: 370). Yet, heritage is not so malleable as one might suspect; rather, in order to become recognized participants in the heritage movement, local cultural institutions must represent themselves and their constituents within global "structures of common difference" (Wilk 1995), i.e. the more rehearsed, and commonly accepted narratives of difference within the global discourse of identity politics. Within this discursive structure, the Louisiana Museum for African American History (LMAAH) is concerned with connecting oral histories with historical events and "inventing" a tradition of resistance to white supremacy to be continued for generations to come. The African American story is thereby made universal through the themes of resistance and empowerment, as opposed to made narrow and provincial by relying upon a "cult of victimhood" (Lowenthal 1996).

LMAAH stands out as a museum and as a non-profit organization in post-Katrina New Orleans because it is unafraid to offer highly politicized interpretations of historical events. Although a non-profit entity, it is an institution which chooses not to focus the majority of its development activities around grant-writing and politicking unlike Junebug Productions and the Ashé Cultural Arts Center. Perhaps because of this preference for unbridled expression and for grassroots support, LMAAH is a museum without walls: Lacking sufficient financial and/or political capital to acquire a physical location to display its collections, LMAAH tends mostly to be event-based, as opposed to place-based. While the museum does sponsor lectures that speak to the intellectual history of African Americans, particularly in and around New Orleans and throughout Louisiana, these engagements are carefully planned so as to speak easily to academic *and* non-academic audiences alike. LMAAH positions itself as an arbiter of authenticity in part as a way to cut through the tourist trap portrayals of so many smiling Black faces. Knowledge of “true and authentic history” which rightfully identifies and celebrates African heroes and revolutionaries is made available to everyday people like students, teachers, public and private workers, as well as elders, artists, and activists in the hopes that they will use their righteous indignation to agitate for social change and transformation.



Figure 18: Leon A. Waters speaking at the Community Book Center on the 200th anniversary of the 1811 Revolt

LMAAH, like its predecessors and peers, is actually much more in line theoretically with what Paolo Freire outlines in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* than any of the other organizations thus far discussed. LMAAH offers public lectures and presentations for now as it looks for a building in which to install its extensive artifacts and exhibits. Problem-posing education is very much the point of these events: History is presented to folks in such a way that it provides a context for today's conditions. The contemporary moment is demystified and de-naturalized, and revolutionary action is put on the table as a possibility, given that men and women throughout history have resisted under much more austere circumstances.

While LMAAH's origins can be traced back organizationally to its Founders' involvement with the local Communist Party, the institution is also wholly indebted to the Black Arts and Black Power movements of the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, LMAAH's direct ties to the Communist Party only serve to enhance its connection to the Black Arts

movement in particular.⁷ Unlike the organizations discussed in previous chapters, which use art as a medium through which to inform and inspire, LMAAH lays claim to a different model of cultural organizing; rather than engaging directly in the art-making process, LMAAH practices cultural organizing by calling upon, popularizing and celebrating the local culture of resistance as it agitates for social change. In adhering to pedagogy of the oppressed with its sponsored lectures, LMAAH also evinces its status as a legatee of the Black Power and Black Arts movements.

Organizational predecessors to the Louisiana Museum for African American History

Like Junebug Productions, the history of LMAAH begins with its predecessor: the Afro American Liberation League. In 1979, the Afro American Liberation League was formed by a group of active, Black radicals. Mr. Leon Waters and his colleague Mr. Malcolm Suber were among them. It is true that they both continue to hold communist convictions, but, Mr. Waters says, “I have never been a member of the Communist Party because the organizations is a revisionist or ‘false’ communist organization” (Personal communication, October 3, 2013). Soon after the organization’s founding, on November 13th, 1980, the Liberation League galvanized a critical mass of supporters, getting its “thrust” as the NOPD launched “a violent, murderous offensive” in Algiers Fischer Housing projects, “some of the more deplorable living conditions” in the city (Leon Waters. Personal communication. January 22, 2011). In retaliation for the murder of an Algiers police officer, the NOPD’s “sweeping terrorist offensive” killed Raymond Ferdinand; James Billup – on whom the “police plant a gun in his right hand, not

⁷ Smethurst (2005) argues that this is a common predecessor of Black Arts organizations both locally and nationally.

knowing he's left-handed" (ibid); Reginald Miles; and Sheryl Singleton, who was several months pregnant at the time that the NOPD murdered her. In response, the Liberation League organized rallies and marches and even raised money to hire an attorney to bring the murderous NOPD officers to justice. Because of the Liberation League's efforts, 3 out of the 20-something officers involved received jail time.

In 1985, Mr. Waters ran for public office with the full support of the Afro American Liberation League. His campaign slogan would be "make the rich pay!"

I campaigned on street corners, I put up big signs on Claiborne, which is the number 1 big street, that said make the rich pay. And cars passed white and black saying "yeah!" "yes, indeed!" "who is that?" The white media blacklisted me. I spoke one time at one of those debates. The next day the newspaper said, it basically said this man should never be allowed to speak at all. Because they went on to explain what he said and how he said it is going to polarize the community between the rich and the working-class. So they banned me from coming to anything. Ok. I campaigned on my own, I think I might have one of my flyers upstairs somewhere. Make the rich pay. And I would speak, exposing the contradictions. I would argue that at that time the minimum wage should be brought up to \$8 an hour. That's possible, we don't have a just system today because all the industrialists who own New Orleans are making trillions of dollars. And in the eyes of the people, that makes sense. "He's saying lower their profits 1% and I can get a better wage and live better. That makes sense." And that caused a stir in the community because everybody else was saying "well I'm for the rich and the poor and I think we should try to find ways to expand business..." but they never say nothing about wages. They never do. They talk in both sides of their mouths to *deceive* the people.

[...] But when you talk with a platform that hits the guts of the people and you popularize that, people say this "this guy's saying things that I've always felt!" So the first time that I did that I got 8,400 votes! The picayune wrote an article saying this guy got 4% of the electorate to vote for him. The mistake was we should've kept running. But we got involved in other things, 1811 slave revolt, and other stuff. We should've kept going! and *build* on that... I mean think about it, and this comes from inexperience; 8,400 people. If i had just found 10% of 8,400 I could have begun a machine that had 840 people. And then 15, 20 years later here we are, we could've had this thing a much more bigger movement. That's some of the mistakes we made by not understanding what we had in front of us. I laugh and chuckle because I know much better now (ibid).

Speaking directly to the economic concerns of the poor and working classes, Mr. Waters' campaign succeeded in forcing the mainstream candidates to acknowledge key economic issues. However, having failed to build upon the momentum the campaign began, by the early 1990s, the Liberation League was not as active as it once was. Many of its members joined the African-American History Alliance of Louisiana (AAHAL)

and would later take leadership roles within that organization. In 1994, “as a result of a story that I had been verbally telling people for years, we began to investigate the 1811 Slave Revolt which resulted in the publication of the book [*On to New Orleans!*] as well as the city-wide public commemorations” (Leon Waters. Personal communication, January 22, 2011). Leaders from the Liberation League threw their full support behind the formation of the Alliance and the popularization of little-known Black Revolutionary History; and so the Liberation League died out for lack of sufficient human capital.

Charged with a new infusion of spirited leadership, and a new direction for formerly burnt out political activists, the African American History Alliance of Louisiana was established in 1995. Its mission was to popularize Black history and inspire a new generation of leaders to struggle for freedom as their ancestors had. As discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation, the telling of the story of the 1811 Slave Uprising played a major role in carrying out the AAHAL’s mission. Together the organization pooled resources so that the research could be conducted which would lead to the publication of *On to New Orleans!*, the definitive account of the events of 1811 supported by multiple appendices of primary source material. Additionally, the AAHAL organized an 1811 Commemoration celebrated by New Orleans Public Schools in January of the years 1995 through 2004.

Around the same time, the AAHAL led a campaign to identify the physical vestiges of a bygone era of white supremacy. Mr. Waters’ colleague Malcolm Suber spearheaded the effort to popularize the history of white supremacy in New Orleans: as a public lecturer Mr. Suber has informed scores of ordinary citizens about the white supremacy monument, and about the carnival krewes (Pickwick and Boston Clubs) which

organized the White League and its paramilitary activities. While leading the fight for the New Orleans Public School system to recognize and commemorate the 1811 Slave Uprising, Mr. Suber also organized with students, parents, school administrators, and officials to remove the names of slave masters from New Orleans Public Schools, which by the 1990s were serving a majority-Black student population. Together with AAHAL, Mr. Suber was successful in changing the names of 22 schools.

But Mr. Suber, Mr. Waters, and their colleagues with AAHAL saw the momentum they were building as a point of departure; political education was not their end-game. As Mr. Waters tells me:

We were always looking for opportunities to raise money [for AAHAL] and there was somebody we heard about, didn't know. A woman named Dr. Margaret Burroughs who was quite a historian, quite a museum starter. So we were looking for this lady so we could contact her to consider coming here to be our main speaker for a fundraising dinner. We were looking for this lady since 2000 [2 years]. The times that we would call this lady in Chicago, she's in Africa. That's all we knew of her. In early 2002, I think it was February or March, she was in town displaying some of her artwork. We would learn that she was in town at Joan's Gallery, a Black lady in the second-hundred block of St. Charles she has an art gallery, I can't think of the name right now. It'll come to me. And that's when we met her [Dr. Burroughs]... And that's when we told her about 1811. And then she told us she is from here – she is from St. Rose, she moved away to Chicago when she was 4. And in the conversation, she's first time learning about this whole story. We never were able to hook up for her to take the tour, but she said "damn, these must have been my ancestors too." And more than likely they were.

In meeting her, she raised to us "have you guys ever thought about opening a museum?" We said no, we're not museum people. We're not qualified. She laughed at us, said "you don't need no goddamn credentials, PhD degrees." The more we listened the more she talked. It was *her* idea, she planted the seed in us that "yall should have a museum; all the kind of work you people been doing is gonna be lost when you die. We need a museum with all of this radical history and radical effort that yall done to tell the story." I was blown away. At that time, she had a relationship with the museum in Tremé. But she's telling us you should build a museum. She would later have some bad experiences with the board [of NOAAM]... She has a cousin who works for that group whose name is Charlie Johnson. Professor Johnson and his wife are professors at SUNO. But it was her idea, she said you need a serious *history* museum. She never said anything negative about that group, because her relative was a part of that group, and in the beginning we're just getting to know each other. Later in time she came to get to know me and I proved myself [...]

Anyway, things developed to the point where we would bring her to be the speaker for this fundraiser. But this is what she proposed, she said "listen, why don't I come to town on a Thursday, and on a Friday we have a workshop at Dookie's restaurant" -- because she liked Dookie's food. "And then I can give you the history of the DuSable museum that I built, and then the next day we'll do the dinner at Ashé." Well the history she gave us was fascinating: "I started in my house, pushing Black art,

acquiring Black artifacts and stuff like that. And in time they grew. My husband came to me and said ‘honey, look this is a house, you got everybody coming through here. 2 things, one we need to put a box in here and tell people to start leaving donations. This is a home, a personal home. We should just leave a box by the door for donations.’ So then her husband and some other like-minded people would say “we need a facility for a museum so we can get our house back.” So they started a petition campaign and got several thousand signatures – I don’t know how many, 30 thousand or what, but a lot – and brought it to the city of Chicago and demanded that “we want a public building; yall got buildings around this whole city that yall don’t even use.” They got a building through that method and it cost them \$1. And they got going and they got started. But the building that exists today is not the building that the city gave them, but they had to get started somewhere. They grew from that to the big building that they got today. They got a big building that has a park in front of it in the West side of Chicago.

For the next several years she and her husband until they passed were responsible for some 40-odd Black museums all over America and 1 in Jamaica. She would build a group called the National Black Artists Association (there’s a chapter here), she and another man named Dr. Wright – she used to speak of him, there’s a museum named after him in Detroit – would start something called the Association of African American Museums. Those 2 organizations still carry on today as a result of her work and her legacy. So we got introduced, we had a workshop, from that workshop we kinda came to an agreement that we need to start a museum. She made it very clear that it doesn’t require all these things – I can understand, but you don’t know, you’ll get all these things later: fine equipment, fine this and that, all that can come later. And the board decided – some of the people who are with us now were with us then, other people Katrina messed them up to where they scattered. Myrna was one of our main leading people who ran membership [she now lives in Birmingham, but visits New Orleans from time to time]. So we decided after a several-hour workshop with Dr. Burroughs the next day at the fundraising dinner we decided to change it to the purpose of not just a fundraising dinner but a kick-off for the museum, which officially meant the ending of AAHAL. So we gonna kick this off tomorrow, so we gonna have to come up with a new name for a new organization.

Dr. Burroughs made the presentation and included in the presentation she made the pitch, she said “let them step up. Everybody who comes and steps up with \$100 will get one of my paintings at no charge. 12 people stepped forward. One was my aunt, who’s now passed on. And that’s how we got started. And that first year was spent trying to find free space. We would find it at St. Augustin, and the board felt that we don’t wanna be perceived as people who can’t pay their own way. we didn’t have any money, but we told Father who was gonna give us the space – we had 9 ft by 30 ft, 2700 square ft of space on the 2nd floor, which required a huge volunteer effort because it was a place where he had allowed so many people to store so much stuff. it was all junky, furniture all kinds of stuff. it took a city garbage truck to come over there where we carried stuff out and threw it down in the yard from the second floor to clean that space out. We had a lot of volunteers, 30, 40 people cleaned that place up. Then the young people, my son, Tanika, and other people, friends, family... they would later paint the walls this conservative color... and Von [Mr. Waters’ son] and Tanika and some other people got the floor. Sanded it polyurethaned [it]. It was red pine, and that day they did not check with Father Paul. Word got to Paul and he panicked and ran up there, because he don’t know what you’re doing and he should have been consulted, but he was so moved by what they did. it was beautiful, brought out all the light and richness. The next time just – see he had to answer to authorities you can’t do that, you gotta do things a certain way. but we got going, we put up some things there and word was getting around “they got a serious museum there” because all of it was visual arts at Treme [NOAAM]. Now they got a new Director [John Hankins] and he’s trying to turn this thing around. So anyway, we got going and the rest is history.”

Interestingly, LMAAH got its start at the behest of a prominent African American woman, and visual artist at that. Like Junebug Productions and Ashé Cultural Arts Center, LMAAH is a non-profit which was created out of the collaboration between Black men and women; unfortunately, however, LMAAH and Junebug have adhered to a gendered division of labor, wherein the male charismatic leader acts as the prophetic visionary while the women of the organization largely act as the anonymous administrative and logistical support. Mr. Waters it seems, has proven more amenable to adaptation and has incorporated many of his female co-counsels directly into his organizing, taking their ideas seriously.

As coincidence would have it, Margaret Burroughs was born in St. Rose, Louisiana; as a young adult, Dr. Burroughs frequently wrote for the *Chicago Defender* in the 1930s. Outspoken on the political issues of her day, Dr. Burroughs was actively involved in the founding of the South Side Community Art Center, the largest Federal Art Project supported by the Works Progress Administration. Established in 1941, the Center – like the DuSable Museum – originated in a brownstone mansion located on Michigan Avenue in an area known as the ‘South Side.’ Volunteers transformed the mansion into a space dedicated to the creative work of black artists. Until McCarthyism stifled its radical politics, the Center – in confluence with the work of Chicago activists like poet Gwendolyn Brooks, Paul Robeson, and Burroughs – transformed Communist Party dogma into a ‘nascent model and inspiration for cultural insurrection created and led by African Americans’ (Burns 2008: 44).

Continuing to join together the evocative forces of art and politics, in 1946 Burroughs earned her BA in Art Education from the Art Institute of Chicago, and two

years later in 1948 she would complete her Master's degree in Art Education there as well. She immediately began teaching at DuSable High School in the Hyde Park neighborhood of the city, which was then an area into which Southern Black migrants like herself were rapidly moving. Over the course of her 27-year career as a public school art teacher, Dr. Burroughs saw the Hyde Park neighborhood transform thanks in large part to the University of Chicago's aggressive push for urban renewal in its backyard. She also would see transformative changes take place in the political landscape. Early on in her career, the outspoken, radical teacher would be summoned by her Principal and later by the Board of Education to answer questions about her political ideology and activism.

That was 1952, so applied for sabbatical leave and I got the sabbatical leave, because you know on sabbatical they pay a substitute two-thirds of your salary, and you get one-third. I went on down to Mexico. Charlie [Burroughs] and I went on down to Mexico, and I was able to live on that one-third for a year. And [I] took my daughter with me and my nephew and just had a wonderful time. I studied within the Taller de Gráfica Popular. I studied mural painting and traveled all over Mexico, and I got strong, strong. So when I got to the end of that year, I said 'Hey, they're not going to take my job from me. I worked too hard for this job' (Fleming 1999: 39)

In 1953, when the Illinois Urban Community Conservation Act was conceived and enacted to give local leaders and institutions the power and resources to eradicate blight and (re-)develop slum areas as they saw fit, Dr. Burroughs was not there to witness what was taking place. Instead, in 1952 and 1953 she was given a one-woman show in Mexico City, where she lived and studied for that year. By 1968, at the end of her teaching career, some tens of thousands of poor residents both Black and white had already been displaced to make way for white middle class residential and commercial developments (Hirsch 2005).

As an artist, Dr. Burroughs excelled at printmaking, sculpture, painting, and poetry. Some of her more famous works included woodcuts. Woodcut – also known as

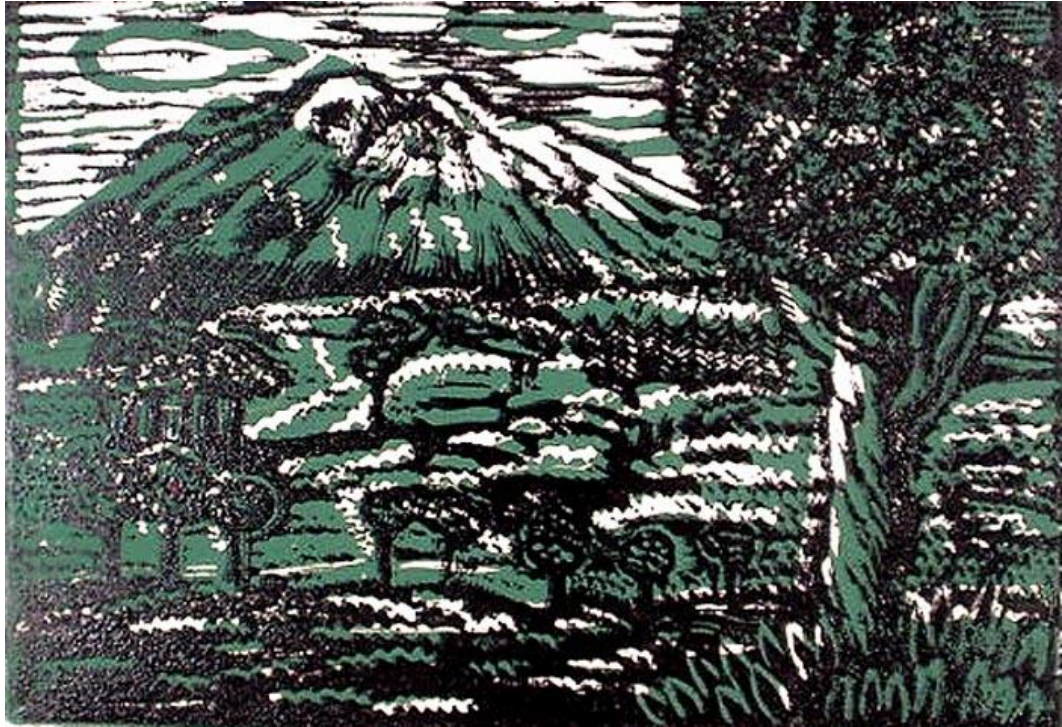


Figure 19: “Popocateple (Mexico),” a color linocut from Burroughs’ 1952 exhibition in Mexico City.

xylography – is a relief printing artistic technique in printmaking in which an image is carved into the surface of a block of wood, with the printing parts remaining level with the surface while the non-printing parts are removed, typically with chisels or gouges. The areas to show ‘white’ are cut away, leaving the characters or image to show in 'black' at the original surface level. The block is cut along the grain of the wood, unlike wood engraving where the block is cut in the end-grain. The surface is then covered with ink by rolling over the surface with an ink-covered roller, or brayer, leaving ink upon the flat surface but not in the non-printing areas. The end result is a print with indelible texture. Dr. Burroughs also used the linocut technique as well where the artist, rather than carving a block of wood, makes subtractive cuts from a sheet of linoleum.

Dr. Burroughs created art out of her everyday surroundings. With bold lines and simple shapes, she aimed to present the beauty and the truth of the ordinary in her art objects. For example, in her 1952 color linocut entitled, “Popocateple (Mexico),” Burroughs takes a simple landscape and creates movement and texture with her use of blunt lines and shapes, and rich, over-saturated color. Rather than aiming for a sophisticated, high art aesthetic rife with photographic detail, Burroughs exhibited a folk-art style, and her art – like the people for whom it was created – appeared a little rough around the edges. Similarly, Dr. Burroughs’ sculpture also deploys the subtractive method rather than casting a mold. Having already worked out a politicized aesthetic at the South Side Community Art Center, Burroughs was moved by the art of Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco who worked within the paradigm of “new realism” (Yousef 2006). She would return to Chicago as committed as ever to marrying art and politics.

As an art teacher in the Chicago Public Schools, Dr. Burroughs “bootlegged” Black history into her lesson plans:

I just couldn’t see myself standing in front of a group of eager-eyed young black people and not being able to tell them something very positive about themselves... we had this white principal -- at that time most of our principals were Anglos -- and so I would be teaching art... and while the kids were drawing, I’d be telling them about Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, and so forth and so on like that. And then I’d look up and there would be the principal at the door. And I said, “And yes, students, as I was saying, remember how Betsy Ross sewed that flag. She did a really good job sewing that flag, didn’t she?” And when he went away we went back on talking about black history. It was bootlegging it (Fleming 1999: 35-36).

But Dr. Burroughs’ contributions to Black Chicago did not end with her career as a teaching artist. As a lover of the arts and an avid world traveler, Dr. Burroughs collected books and artifacts which spoke to her radical racial sensibilities. Members of Carter G.

Woodson's Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, the Burroughs' campaigned for the public recognition of Negro History Week in Chicago;

During the 1940s-1950s, the Burroughs's lived in a coach house behind a large mansion on 3806 South Michigan Avenue, in Chicago's South Side. The coach house became known among their friends as the 'Chicago Salon' for its role in playing host to gatherings of prominent (and increasingly controversial) black intellectuals, teachers, and artists, including DuBois, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robeson, and James Baldwin -- as well as Margaret Burroughs's colleagues from Chicago's public schools (Burns 2008: 47-48).

By 1961, her home had become overrun with rare and exotic items she had gathered; and so, she and her husband founded the Ebony Museum of History and Art. And in so doing, Dr. Burroughs, the museum's dedicated leader, set

trends that would characterize many of the other black neighborhood museums established during the mid-late 1960s: the presentation of full-scale exhibits themed around African and African American history and culture; the pursuit of a collections policy meant to challenge and revise the long-standing erasure of African American history and culture in mainstream institutions; and, above all, an emphasis on the need for public outreach to the local black community (Burns 40).

In 1968, reflecting changes in nomenclature, and attitudes toward self-definition, the Ebony Museum of History and Art changed its name from the Museum of Negro History and Art to the DuSable Museum in honor of Chicago's first permanent settler, the African-descended and Haitian-born Jean Batiste Pointe DuSable.

The DuSable Museum placed ads in local papers like the Chicago Defender to solicit donations to be added to their collections as well as their coffers. While the DuSable Museum would direct outreach programs to the surrounding Black community in South Side Chicago, their target audience was schoolchildren. Both art and artifacts were exhibited that presented a cohesive narrative of the history of Africa and her diaspora. The museum sponsored an essay-writing contest for school-age youth to expound upon the importance of knowing one's history; offered internships for Black students interested in museum science, African history, and Black culture; provided an

after school program to keep kids busy and out of trouble; and the museum also taught a seminar on Black history for school teachers.

Hoping to spread the gospel of Black museums, Burroughs and her colleagues hosted a series of conferences beginning in the late 1960s which ultimately led to the formation of the AAMA in 1978. This association allowed Black museum workers to pool resources, collaborate on exhibits, and professionalize skill sets and protocols. While AAMA and others have greatly assisted in the proliferation of Black museums nationwide, by the 1980s and 1990s even the DuSable Museum was feeling the pressure to scale back its programming and reduce its staff. In efforts to stave off this eventuality, the DuSable Museum ramped up its fundraising activities aggressively. This led some folks on the South Side to question whether the DuSable had abandoned its dedication to the grassroots in favor of bourgeois financial support (Burns 2008: 263). Wracked by internal power struggles, the DuSable did see a decline in its reputation as a community-based cultural institution. But it had succeeded, along with other institutions affiliated with the Black Museum Movement, in helping to “mainstream” Black history and culture; by the 1990s, traditional museums nationwide were incorporating artifacts into their collections and exhibits into their programming that reflected a multicultural perspective.

Louisiana Museum for African American History (LMAAH)

Much like the DuSable Museum’s charismatic leader, Dr. Burroughs, LMAAH is chaired by a zealous and energetic leader – Mr. Leon Waters. Although Mr. Waters is

very much a product of his times, because of his family life, the lessons he has learned studying African and African American history, and perhaps his understanding of Communist thought, Mr. Waters is a man who has absolutely no trouble at all submitting to the wisdom and leadership of Black women. Unfortunately, as we have seen, this cannot be said for too many of his counterparts both within “the Movement” and without.

A museum board oversees the activities of the Louisiana Museum for African American History. It has eight members, all Black, with an equal number of men and women. With the exception of myself, every Board Member has either grown up in the Greater New Orleans area, or has spent the majority of their adult life living and working in the city. For example, Mr. Suber was born and raised in South Carolina, but came to New Orleans in 1975 and has lived here ever since. When one looks at the median age of the LMAAH Board, it becomes clear that this organization, like so many others, struggles to overcome a persistent and widening generation gap. Before I was asked to join the Board in the summer of 2010, the youngest Board Member was already at (or near) 40; the oldest Board Member was about to celebrate his eightieth birthday. A veteran of the Civil Rights movement, Rev. “Skip” Alexander – the oldest member of the Board – joined LMAAH in the hopes that he would have somewhere to store and exhibit his original photography; Rev. Alexander has over 20 years worth of photography documenting the Civil Rights movement, its leaders, landmarks, and watershed moments.

I was asked to join LMAAH’s board after becoming close with Mr. Waters. I had been recently fired from my job at the Roots of Music when I went to see a film and panel discussion hosted by the Patois International Human Rights Film Festival. There I met the man who would become one of my greatest champions and mentors. Mr. Waters

was one of the first people to congratulate me on my recent firing, citing my nerve and my convictions as characteristics of which to be proud. I would later take several of his Hidden History Tours, and would become, eventually, a sort of informal advisor to him on matters of business development and marketing. Quickly, it seemed, Mr. Waters had realized that he and his enterprises could profit from my academic skill sets and credentials, as well as my knowledge of Black youth and popular cultures. Always one to take my ideas seriously, Mr. Waters convinced me to join the board with ease. Upon joining, it became clear to me that while the organization aspired to act in the capacity of a DuSable museum, LMAAH did not really fit the bill of a traditional museum. In possession of thousands of pages of rare documents and photos, the museum could boast a robust collection of neither art nor artifacts. Additionally, with so much of the museum's reputation and activities tied to Mr. Waters' ideas and endeavors, LMAAH suffered from not having clear structures, systems and protocols in place to keep the organization from over-extending itself.

Although it might seem obvious that LMAAH's Board Members would share an ideology or perspective, or way of seeing the world that is hardly the case. While Rev. Alexander might be a staunch supporter and advocate for the cause of Civil Rights, Mr. Waters and Mr. Suber are much more outspoken about the failures of integration and the necessity of class struggle. On the other hand, the women of the Board tend to be much more spiritually inclined, when discussing Black history, or the Black present; however, their spiritual practices and faith traditions are anything but uniform. Mrs. Eugenia Adams, the Board's Parliamentarian, was born in the Seventh Ward and raised in the Sixth Ward, which is referred to as the Tremé neighborhood; Mrs. Adams, although not

the stereotypical, light-skinned Creole, helped to found the Louisiana Creole Association which specializes in family research and genealogy. Although a founding member, Mrs. Adams asserts:

I neither identify myself as Creole or African American. Because I was born in the United States of America, I refer to myself as an American. More importantly, I identify myself as a child of God. My family did not speak French in our home.....my paternal grandmother did speak Creole, but not to me.....my grandmother and her friends would speak the patois when me or other children was around to keep us from hearing their conversation. I was reared by maternal my aunt, who was the first in my mother's family to be born in the United States. My mother was from Belize, British Honduras, which in now Belize City, Belize, Central America. Individuals in my mother's family spoke English/Spanish. I am however, a Catholic and practice my religion (Personal communication, September 8, 2013).

Mrs. Luester Blair, a retired teacher, was raised in the rural suburb of Marrero on the Westbank of the Mississippi river. Not only is Mrs. Blair retired from teaching in the Jefferson Parish Public Schools, Mrs. Blair is also retired from teaching Baptist Sunday School. The two elder women follow Christian denominations; Monique Moss, who is young enough to be Mrs. Blair's or Mrs. Adams' daughter, actively leads and participates in the city's African-centered religious community. Moss graduated from Tulane University with a degree in Dance; she wrote her Masters' thesis on "Congregation as Cultural Rite and Civil Right." As a dancer and choreographer, Moss teaches and trains in the Haitian Vodou tradition.

Perspectives on history, religion and spirituality tend to cleave along the lines of gender and age. Political perspectives, on the other hand, tend to be more difficult to parse. While Mr. Waters' and Mr. Suber's political ideology is clear, it is not so clear for the rest of the Board Members. The elder women of the LMAAH Board, would seem to be rather easily categorized as "Progressives," women who believe in equal rights for all and the ideal of the democratic process, but see that process as dominated by corrupt, corporate interests. Mr. Smith -- perhaps the Board's most phantom member -- seems to

be much more in line with the thinking of economic nationalists who “buy Black,” supporting Black businesses and causes all the while staying away from protests and rallies in favor of aggressively pursuing the accumulation of wealth.

However different the political persuasions of LMAAH’s Board Members, they all agree on the museum’s official mission: To educate and to document, exhibit, and preserve the struggle for freedom and liberation of the African and African American people here in the United States, with emphasis on Louisiana. This includes the global struggles of the enslaved Africans beginning in the slave ships, through the Middle Passage, their arrival in the Americas, their armed campaign for freedom in the Civil War and Reconstruction, and their continued fight for self-determination in the 20th and 21st centuries.

With its principal aim being to educate its audience on the Black liberation struggle, LMAAH makes clear that its purpose as a museum goes beyond simply exhibiting artifacts. As discussed above, museums are a technology used to order the world, and mediate one’s experience of it. LMAAH is no exception; institutionally, however, LMAAH is pretty exceptional, given that its Board Members see their work with the museum as explicitly political. For example, even the words they choose to use to describe Black participation in the Civil War is politicized: “their armed campaign for freedom.”

While LMAAH’s mission states that the historical trajectory it aims to trace begins in Africa with resistance to enslavement, the starting point for talking about Black history is, nevertheless, conquest and enslavement. Perhaps this point of departure was chosen as a means to compress the timescale with which LMAAH would work; after all,

Black history spans many millennia. But with so much of LMAAH's focus on the period of enslavement, the museum is another voice (a willing participant in?) echoing the oft-rehearsed narrative of Black history which somehow tends to both begin and end with enslavement. American Indian Curator, David Penney, outlines the four archetypal stories – comedy, tragedy, romance, and ironic satire – as they apply to historical narratives (2000). In New Orleans, the story of colonialism and later Americanization tend to be framed as inevitable tragedies of progress. What LMAAH does differently from its more mainstream counterparts is that it does not parse Black and Creole histories, and it does not cast these histories of oppression as tragedies; rather, LMAAH lifts up events like the 1811 Slave Revolt as a story of romantic transcendence to which we all can aspire.

But just because the Board Members agree on the mission does not mean that there is always consensus when it comes to *how* the story of Black resistance is presented. For example, one question in the back of everyone's mind is: Which stories should LMAAH present and which should it not? Because of the most active leaders on the Board are men who tend to think about resistance as a political act in the vein of armed resistance, revolutions and revolts, marches and rallies, LMAAH has only produced one exhibit for its permanent collection. This exhibit is dedicated to honoring the heroes of the 1811 Slave Revolt.

One visitor, writing in the visitor's log, commented: "you all don't have the equipment that 'normal' museums have – like display stands; but what you do have is the *substance* that 'normal' museums don't have" (Leon Waters. Personal communication, January 23, 2013). This visitor was referring to the unorthodox way in which LMAAH's

permanent collection was displayed. The museum's keystone exhibit is the 1811 Slave Revolt. Because the museum operates on a shoestring budget, the exhibit is displayed on 14 over-sized posterboard panels. On the second floor of the St. Augustin Church, the museum visitor was confronted by a makeshift display: milk crates, stacked at least 10-high; and, because Mr. Waters and other Board Members had ready access to school supplies, "we wrapped the crates with bulletin paper in blue or red, then the panels were mounted on 4x8 plastic boards; then we took paper clips [and disfigured them in order] to hang the boards from the milk-crate columns" (ibid).

On display are the names of the "Martyrs" compiled from various archives. The exhibit also gives its visitors the opportunity to touch and to hold the shackle that was once fastened around the ankle of a baby. Almost completely rusted over, the tiny object feels like a paperweight in the hands of an adult. The artifact serves to contextualize the conditions to which the 1811 Martyrs were so fiercely opposed. The shackle also serves as a contemporary counterpoint to more apologetic notions of Louisiana slavery as somehow softer and gentler than in other parts of the United States.

The museum has also presented about the Underground Railroad, an exhibit on loan from Mr. Waters' friend and colleague Mr. Boxley, based in Mississippi. The exhibit on the Underground Railroad was designed and built by the Ashé Cultural Center's Co-Founder, Douglas Redd. Taking the form of a pinball machine, the exhibit highlighted the expert maneuvering it took for "Conductors" to avoid the ever-present and menacing obstacles to freedom like Bounty Hunters, snitches, unexpected sale, etc. Along the trajectory were placed photographs and documents such as bills of sale and newspaper articles. For many men, women and children, escape was something that was

attempted repeatedly, over and over and over again – this was made clear in that the pinball itself is almost always sent rolling back down to its starting point. Visitors to the museum were able to see this exhibit from September 2002 to May 2004. During that time over 1,100 guests saw and reviewed the exhibit, about thirty percent of whom were Elementary and High School students.

Some local visitors made the connection between education, consciousness-raising and social transformation. For example a New Orleanian writes: “Most informative. Black kids should be taken here to see their ancestors’ struggle and maybe crime among blacks [sic] will take a different turn” (LMAAH 2004). Another one writes: “This was a soul-stirring experience for me! The older I get, the more I want to know about my heritage. Thank you for contributing to my awareness” (ibid).

Additionally, many of LMAAH’s guests were national and international visitors, some of whom also left feedback and commentary on the power and dynamism of the Underground Railroad exhibit. For example, a visitor from Harvard, Massachusetts writes: “Wonderful exhibit – many facts I had never known before. Keep up the good work of finding the truth and telling it – especially to young people. Also, when was the photo of the slave sale taken?” (ibid). Finally, a man from Sydney, Australia exclaims that this exhibit is “a must for every visitor,” while one visitor from Berlin comments, “we spent five years fighting fascism and Hitler in World War II. It seems like you have spent several hundred years fighting the same” (ibid).

Making just that connection about exposing the ugliness and genocidal violence embedded throughout U.S. History, Mr. Waters makes this point:

The museum is like a united front that works on a particular area popularizing history. But because so much of your history is revolutionary and hidden, you can see the possibilities of that, how that can influence people like today. The people at this talk were

like 35-65 year olds, and one guy said man, shit, we need a revolt today! Now he had that fast connected the story [of the 1811 Slave Revolt] with what's going on today. he said, man you on to something, I bet the police don't like you going around talking about all this stuff. I bust out laughing. I said they sure don't. they don't want nobody to know our history because they can see how much strength we get from our history... and that's why we're using a cultural form so-to-speak to popularize true history. It's a indirect way of bringing up political questions. And the sophisticated white people know that and that's why they do everything they can to suppress it, because they're not stupid. "Why would these black people wanna celebrate this? Man! This is gonna expose us, our savagery back then and they'll be able to connect this to the savagery that we're doing to them today. Oh, nonononono, we don't want to talk about this stuff." but that's so much of the history that we're talking about (Leon Waters. Personal communication, January 22, 2011).

Adopting a "cultural form" with which to introduce political ideas has proved largely successful to LMAAH. The problem-posing method of connecting history to present-day struggles has also proven successful; its audiences are faithful and come to LMAAH's public events to share and discuss opinions, events and ideas in the same fashion that folks congregate at the Community Book Center to talk shop. Yet the museum also faces significant challenges as a grassroots African-American cultural institution. Indeed, "African American museums are underfunded due to historical barriers, cultural preferences for charitable giving, institutional youth, and a dearth of professional business and museum skills" (Williams & Worth 2007: 3).⁸ These factors are evident in LMAAH's relative structurelessness. Mrs. Luester Blair, a Founding Board Member, speaks directly to this issue:

one of the things that we may have been lacking was that it wasn't – we did not seem to have an actual structure as to when we're going to do things [at LMAAH] ... I mean, yes we had the museum and that was great, but then after that was no more – and we would talk about the things, but to me we were not actually doing them. And, granted, some things would happen, but it wasn't as if it was an organized structure – to me. And so I felt that what we needed to do – and that was when you all came on board – was to have a calendar of events of what we were gonna do and how we were gonna do it. And so I felt that that was *my* contribution to them, to kinda get a little more structure as to what was gonna happen. And I guess the thing is, that's what we do at my church. We come together and each ministry has to present goals and objectives for the coming year. And it *works*, believe me it works. And I'm the Public Information Officer for my church; and so I use that calendar in order to send information in to the Times-Picayune about what's

⁸ Though with a new African-American museum scheduled to break ground on the Washington Mall in 2015, this trend may slowly begin to reverse, as the profiles of local Black museums are raised nation-wide.

going on in the different ministries. And so I'm able to look at that calendar and tell what's gonna happen. And so I feel that when a question is posed, or some comment needs to be made, I can make a contribution because I've been in it long enough and I can kinda see what's happening and what I feel needs to happen (Luester Blair. Personal communication, August 23, 2012).

Mrs. Blair continues on to say

I think maybe, sometimes I think we jump around a little bit too much too. And I'm saying that in the sense that maybe we just need to get better organized and that's really what the bottom line is. Like Genie said, we need to get a business plan to know what we want to accomplish and *how* we're going to accomplish it. And that's really the key thing as I see it now. And until we do that, we're all gonna be just, just there and not reaching anything (ibid).

Although Mrs. Blair complains about the lack of structure within the LMAAH Board, the body is not totally devoid of structure. Writing about similarly "structureless" organizations emerging during the height of "women's lib," Jo Freeman asserts: "We cannot decide whether to have a structured or structureless group; only whether or not to have a formally structured one" (Freeman 1970). Freeman reminds the reader that within any social grouping that there are power dynamics at play which inform the adoption of formal and informal structures. The LMAAH Board has at least begun the process of structural formalization by naming its officers. Mr. Waters is the President of the Board, while Mrs. Eugenia (or Genie) Adams is the Board's Parliamentarian. Following *Robert's Rules of Order*, Mrs. Adams offers procedural oversight and access to external resources. She does not, however, see herself necessarily as an "active" member in the way that Mr. Waters and Mr. Suber are active in giving talks and lectures, etc.

While the Board has the makings of a formal decision-making structure, it is often its informal structure that determines the planning and decision-making process. For example, there is no protocol in place with regards to how the museum chooses which collaborations and partnerships to enter into; instead, LMAAH's name is added to the list off the strength of Mr. Waters' or Mr. Suber's (usually Mr. Waters') relationships with

whomever is organizing the effort. Perhaps, because neither Mr. Waters nor Mr. Suber – the two most active leaders on the Board – are regular church-goers, they have not seen and experienced an institutionalized structure like the one Mrs. Blair alluded to with regular deadlines, and sub-committees. Instead, as long-time activists in political, community, and non-profit organizations, Mr. Waters and Mr. Suber have different approaches to movement-building work. Often their approaches are over-determined by patriarchy and the politics of charismatic leadership – in which groups tend to over-rely on a single individual, usually male, for direction.

Because the Board is small – with only eight members, and only about 4 or 5 *active* members – the over-dependency on Mr. Waters is all the more glaring.

Mrs. Blair continues her discussion of the Board's internal dynamics:

I'd like to be able to see us be a little bit more structured, that's for sure. To have a sense of where we *are* going. And I know Leon is really working on that as we said in order to -- this reorganization is something that's really needed at this point because we need more members to be able to accomplish what needs to be accomplished. You know, because he can't do it all by himself, and for the most part he has been, since Katrina. He *has* been, you know, even though we'll help; but he's having to lead prettymuch everything. You know, when we formed the program committee he was in charge of that. And I don't think we ever did anything with the fundraising thing you see. And a lot of times this is what the leader has to do; the leader has to jump into everything to make sure it works, but that's not good on one person. So I think the need for more members is really something we need to look into... More board members who can actually assist us; board members who can actually assist us in reaching our desired goals and objectives [...]

Well since Katrina, I'm trying to think about what has happened. I think that was part of the thing right there. Katrina just threw a money wrench into everything because we had members, and we probably *could have* accomplished some end, but since then we just have never sat down -- we've talked about it since you've been with us, you know and we started with the program and so forth. We talked about the business plan, but then you remember Leon had an accident. But here again we were dependent on Leon you see. And when that happened to *him*, things just kind of came to a halt. But it just took a while after Katrina for us to get back on target. And as I said then Leon had the accident, and so now that we're back there again. It's been a number of years since we've been trying to talk about getting a physical site for our museum. And unless we come together and have the goals and objectives we're never gonna accomplish it. We have to have a *timeline* as to when it's gonna happen. You know all of these things are just so important and I think this is what Genie has been saying too, once we get that business plan in place I think we'll be able to move (Luester Blair. Personal communication, August 23, 2012).

Because of severe underfunding, “above the institutional philanthropy of foundations and government, African American cultural institutions depend mostly upon personal philanthropy and community support” (Williams & Worth 2007: 5). Mrs. Blair discusses the museum’s lack of financial stability in comparison to some of the more politically-connected, or well-funded Black institutions when she says:

I’m not really familiar with a lot of the Black institutions. I mean I’ve visited some of the museums; the one that’s on [Gov] Nicholls [Street] because that’s where we were, down the street. But that particular one has government support. We could say that that’s the difference there: they have government support. And then I think that in many instances the government feels that you don’t need all of these different Black history type museums. And then there was another one, I can’t remember, another museum that’s Black and it’s about a Black person; but I went to visit that particular one and they have financial backing. So I think our biggest problem is that we don’t have any finance; we don’t have the backing of the government or what have you. And not that we necessarily want it, but we’re gonna have to find a way to get it in some form. So I think that would be the basic difference: not having the support we need -- the financial support. I don’t think it would be a problem with having the community to back us; because we’ve had people express an interest in what we are doing and all of that, but we just don’t have as I said the finances (ibid).

Although the institution still does not have its own building, it has been able to build a committed following comprised of New Orleanians young and old. And in some ways not having a permanent residence has led LMAAH to form some rather unexpected partnerships; for example, two lectures in 2010 were held at the St. James AME Church. While on the surface it might be rather predictable that LMAAH should partner with an historic Black church to host their consciousness-raising forums, because of its strictly secular orientation LMAAH tends to shy away from open collaboration with religious institutions. However, in the case of both St. James and St. Agustin churches it was a progressive clergyman with a penchant for local Black history that made LMAAH comfortable enough to consider collaboration.

That same year, LMAAH began working with local theater company ArtSpot Productions. This collaboration was certainly unorthodox given that Mr. Waters and Mr.

Suber typically steer clear of partnering with predominantly white institutions when it comes to popularizing Black history. To put it bluntly, white individuals and institutions are simply not trusted to tell the stories of Black families, heroes, achievements or setbacks accurately and without the lens of white supremacy. Moreover, neither Mr. Waters nor Mr. Suber has expressed much in the way of “art appreciation.” But with a knowledge of art’s power to propagandize, the project was picked up and the two men agreed to act as historical consultants on the 2011 production of “Rumours of War.” Owing to overlapping missions (to popularize Black and Revolutionary histories) and staff (Mr. Waters & Mr. Suber), as well as a lack of clear institutional branding, it became a question: Was this a collaboration between ArtSpot and LMAAH, or ArtSport and Hidden History?

Mr. Waters makes clear that the vacillations of opportunists must not be confused with absolute solidarity. He cites several examples of racial and political opportunism which give him pause:

when I bring out in my talk that a section of the free people of color owned slaves, I made a comment, I made a sarcastic remark, which is part serious and part comical. Sometimes I like to bring things out and kind of relax on it, have a little laugh. I said something that went like this: “Some of these traitors helped put down the [1811] revolt, almost like some of these jive middle class blacks we got today.” and the audience erupted. I hit a nerve when I said that, yes indeed! Because what I was trying to do was show the similarity of that vacillating strata with the similarity of today’s vacillating strata -- the section of the black middle class moving with the wind. A section of them are tied into the system in such a way that they’re scared to come to these events, a lecture! “I don’t wanna be seen; once it gets back that I went to that lecture, I’ll be in trouble, man.” Whereas another section that is not tied in with capital, I’m talking about people who are bankers, like take Norman Francis [President of Xavier University since 1968] -- this is the man that owns the bank, Liberty Bank. Norman would never be at any of our events [LMAAH or Hidden History lectures] because the white man would say: “what the hell are you doing going to all those subversive talks? what are you doing there?” and he’d have to explain himself. The power structure here always goes to Norman whenever there’s a need for a black person. For instance, he was the chairperson for the Road to Recovery [LA Road Home Grant Program] for Katrina. They used him, and that kinda gave some false faith to black people -- “oh, one of us is in charge, I know we’re gonna get all the money we’re due” and everybody got shafted... they put Norman on TV... they gotta make sure that they got certain safe people. Arnie Fielkow [then Councilman-at-Large] came out with a statement the other day denouncing the idea of [Governor] Jindal

to merge the universities [UNO & Southern]. What the hell does Arnie Fielkow give a damn about SUNO? He's a Jewish boy, well-off, former VP of the Saints [NFL football team] and no longer with the Saints; why would he put a statement out that says I think this is wrong, it's a wrong idea to think about merging SUNO and UNO. He gave his reasons: that many black people have come out of SUNO, some productive Black professionals, productive citizens in our community, and they should be free to have their space and their own college. That's the reason he gave. Arnie Fielkow don't care about black people, Arnie Fielkow cares about votes. And by making this statement that he knows that by expressing the sympathy that he condemns this, which he knows is the real feeling of the majority of black people that they shouldn't move, he comes across as "oh we got a white ally! thank you Arnie! next election I'ma vote for you again." Meanwhile Arnie's doing all kinda thieving things. He's slick. That's how these liberals are, they *deceive* the masses and come across as a good white guy, our friend. Arnie aint your damn friend. Because he's a member of the capitalist party, he's a member of the capitalist democratic party that voted for invading and murdering people in Iraq, that voted for invading and murdering people in Afghanistan, who'll send your child overseas to do dirty work. He supports all that. They don't look at the *entire* picture, they're caught up looking -- and the media is helping, saying Arnie is supporting yall. And maybe Arnie might be supporting us on *this*, but overall Arnie don't support us on *nothin*, especially all this police abuse and murder. And you see it takes a sharp person to *expose* all that. Yes, he says this, but on these other major questions where does he stand? ... And they don't have any jurisdiction in this so they can pretend they're your friend. And you see that is the kind of clarity we have to bring to people to help them critically think. But first they gotta get educated on the economic order they live in. They gotta get educated on the state they live in, the governing powers. they have to get educated on what is classes? What is the motor for world history? Class struggle. Before they can begin to understand these questions they look at separately to the mistake of the masses. They look at all these things separate, as if they're not connected. And they are very well connected... in the beginning you're not gonna be able to get the masses to understand what I'm saying right now. Because unfortunately the masses don't read. Only a certain section of the population *reads* briefly, *reads* books. And that's what you call the more advanced.

The man with the dope pipe has destroyed the *spirit*. He has destroyed the *spirit* that gives you the energy *to fight back*. So we have our jobs cut out for us (Leon Waters. Personal communication, January 22, 2011).

LMAAH's uncompromising political stance has been and continues to be a characteristic that attracts its audience and has earned the institution admiration and good standing in the circle of Black activists as well as the circle of local cultural institutions. However, Mr. Waters does not overstate the case when he says "we have our jobs cut out for us." Like Junebug Productions, LMAAH struggles to overcome a generation gap as its board members tire and age. Mrs. Luester Blair puts forth that she would like to see LMAAH make a goal of closing the generation gap: "I would like to be able to see various

presentations to get our young people more familiarized with what Black history is all about” (Personal communication, August 23, 2012).

Conclusion

LMAAH is heir to many different streams of radical political thought. However, the museum is a rather obvious participant in the Heritage movement on both global and national scales. Anthropologist Lee Baker talks about the ways in which Race Men and Women at the turn of the twentieth century sought to use the tools and methods of Anthropology firstly to prove that Black people do indeed have a history and a culture; and secondly to validate that culture as worthy of scholarly attention and social respect (1998; 2010). LMAAH, by adopting a western form with which to communicate a sense of a shared history of enslavement and a shared culture of resistance to that enslavement, reactivates the legacy of the Heritage movement at the grassroots level.

But what of LMAAH’s future? By relying so heavily on its leader, Mr. Waters, it will be difficult to ensure its perpetuation. Recognizing the limited capacity of the board, Mr. Waters has asked that we each nominate an additional member. But without any real training on board governance, many of the present board members are not sure who to nominate, or what their nominee should be able to bring to the board. Without a definite structure in place, questions remain: Do we need a grantwriter? Do we need someone trained in museology? In archiving rare collections? Do we need a program manager? An event planner? Or perhaps someone who can close the deal on purchasing a permanent space out of which to operate? Many of the women of the board, particularly Mrs. Adams, Mrs. Blair and myself, have expressed to the group as well as to Mr. Waters

individually that more thought needs to go into the mission, as well as the organizational structure of LMAAH. Moreover, Mrs. Adams has found a woman to work with Mr. Waters in developing a business plan, while Mrs. Blair has suggested an internal calendar be put in place to keep track of board meetings as well as programmatic events. I have spoken with Mr. Waters at length about whether or not the museum model might be the best fit, suggesting that maybe something more like a library, a research institute, or a special collection might be in order.

The suggestions offered to Mr. Waters say something about the nature of the organization as well as the nature of the changing contexts in which LMAAH continues its work. Although the museum is an independent entity which owes nothing to northern philanthropic dictates, it struggles to define itself and its mission in such a way that it becomes clear as to who comprises its target audience, and as to how its work is, in fact, relevant to said audience. Feedback from past visitors helps the museum board to understand that its exhibits are thought-provoking and also at times painful; furthermore, visitors and board members alike suggest reaching out more vigorously to school children and young people. In order for any audience-building campaign to be successful, the institution must first prioritize, and then second throw its entire weight behind the project. But as social movements in the U.S have become institutionalized, it has demanded a certain level of professionalism and access to capital that is beyond of the reach of many grassroots organizations; the focus becomes on how to keep the doors open as projects and campaigns are put on hold due to lack of capacity. Without entrepreneurial spirit, and more importantly, strategy, the radical origin myths that LMAAH tells are not enough to sustain an institution, let alone a movement.

Reflections

August 29th, 2013 marks the 8th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina. I haven't decided whether or not I'll be attending this year's Katrina Commemoration March and Second-line. As I sit in my 3rd floor apartment in the warehouse district, some three blocks from the mighty Mississippi, I am still painfully aware of the fact that so many of New Orleans' Black and Brown residents do not share the same luxury of housing adequate to withstand the potential deluge of super-storm's to come. Since ending the majority of my research activities in the Fall of 2011, I have stayed in New Orleans, refusing to vacate such prime real estate. Working with Mr. Waters both at LMAAH and Hidden History, and continuing with informal interview sessions with Mr. O'Neal have rounded out my research and deepened my analysis. With Mr. Waters, I have been given a unique access to his work, his thoughts, and his contacts, as we have scheduled tours, board meetings and even the occasional storage room cleanups. Unfortunately, Mr. O'Neal has not been so easy to keep up with, as he has handed off the day-to-day operations of JPI to younger artist-administrators.

When he left the organization, so did I, preferring to go underground in search of my own productivity. It wasn't easy, but I had to skip the social justice event-circuit if I was ever to get any writing done. Locked in a dance with so much ethnographic data, and glued to my desk, months passed. And then years. Interlocutors, friends, and colleagues I had once seen and interacted with regularly now looked at me quizzically when we ran into one another:

“Are you still in New Orleans?” they'd ask.

“I sure am,” I would explain, “I’ve just been playing the hermit while trying to write this dissertation.”

After a pause, they’d no doubt ask, “do you think you’ll stay here once you’ve finished?”

The more things change, the more they stay the same

When I moved to New Orleans, I wasn’t sure what I’d find. And I wasn’t sure how long I’d stay. After living in the city for four years, I still cannot say with certainty how long my tenure will last. While I have witnessed many promising social transformations during my few years of fieldwork, I have also observed many obstinate political-economic patterns. For example, many of the young white TFA and TeachNOLA participants are becoming disillusioned and radicalized by the lack of support mechanisms and the blatant institutionalized racism in these organizations. As a result, some have chosen to leave the classroom altogether, opting instead for a life of odd-jobs and organizing. New Teachers’ Roundtable is an organization which has emerged in the last few years to offer new teachers opportunities for professional development, for antiracism training and discussion, and for building solidarity with displaced African American teachers, administrators and school leaders. While the New Teachers’ Roundtable offers a heartening example of cross-racial, intergenerational alliances working for social justice, it remains to be seen whether the organization and its affiliates will be able to translate their successes into the policy arena.

Meanwhile, the Louisiana State Recovery School District has closed two schools and turned eight more over to private charter management companies for the

2013-14 school year. One silver lining in all this is the proliferation of Black homeschoolers. Faced with the rising costs of tuition at private schools, and the strict adherence to high-stakes standardized testing at public schools, many Black parents are opting for a third alternative. Kamali Academy and Natural Genius Homeschool Advantage are two institutions which, for a nominal fee, offer Afrikan-centered curricula designed to inspire students by creating lesson plans out of everyday teachable moments. Still other parents choose to work one-on-one with children, planning field trips and science experiments, while the government provides the curricula and subsidizes the cost of supplies and equipment. For the majority of parents and families, the changes made in the name of “school choice” are anything but consensual, for some resourceful parents and educators possibilities for experimentation, improvisation and self-determination have been opened up.

As a Black woman of childbearing age, I think about having to navigate the jurisdictional maze of public and private education in the not-too-distant future. And while I am keeping an eye on some of the more positive developments in the realm of education, I must also contend with the fact that there’s very little here for children and youth in terms of affordable childcare, recreation, or enrichment. Sure there are plenty of programs for musical education, but where are the science and math camps? Every summer, parents scramble to figure out what to do with their children. A few sports camps and afterschool programs exist, but they operate largely on a shoestring budget and market strictly by word of mouth. A culinary arts camp, sponsored by Emeril Lagasse offers kids a chance to cook up their wildest dreams, but only for a brief two or three weeks. And it’s not free.

As for public recreational activities, it seems that almost every day facilities like parks, pools and playgrounds are shuttered and fenced. What is a parent to do if s/he cannot cover the cost of the few private after-schools and summer camps mentioned above? Ashé's cultural arts camp and Saturday schools are necessary and affordable, but not large enough to serve the entire city. Moreover, the staff is not fully professionalized and often is ill-equipped to deal with children with behavioral issues; many of the hours spent are devoted to classroom management, leaving precious little time to content learning. For this reason some of my friends and colleagues have seen fit to remove their children from the program altogether.

But even with all of these obstacles to raising a family in New Orleans, I would consider staying... if I could earn a comfortable living. The questions of poverty wages and the economic glass ceiling for people of color are central to so many conversations about culture, class, and violence in New Orleans. It is no coincidence that today, on the 8th anniversary of Katrina, that there is a nationwide strike called by fast-food workers in several major cities, and that New Orleans is not one of them. Instead, workers in New Orleans resist their exploitation in more subtle ways, hoping to hold on to jobs in a city where

Nearly half of the African American men in the city are not working according to the GNOCDC. Since 2004, the city's job base has declined 29 percent. Fifty three percent of African American men in the New Orleans area are employed now. African American households in the metro New Orleans area earned 50 percent less than white households, compared to the national percentage of 40 percent.

Jobs continue to shift out from New Orleans to suburbs. In 2004, New Orleans provided 42% of metro or 247,000 jobs, now that number has dropped to 173,000 and the percentage has dropped to 34%.

Low paid tourism jobs, averaging a low \$32,000 a year, continue to be the largest sector of work in New Orleans. But even this low average can be misleading as the hourly average for food preparation and serving jobs in the area is just over \$10.00 an hour, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Median earnings for full-time male African American New Orleans workers are going down and are now at \$31,018; for white male workers they are going up and are now at \$60,075. Whites have experienced an 8 percent increase in middle and upper income households while African Americans have suffered a 4 percent decline. Only 5 percent of black households were in the top income class (over \$102,000) while 29 percent of white households were (Quigley 2013).

In my experience, if you don't have anyone to vouch for you, take you under their wing, or promote and advocate for you professionally, you can forget about finding meaningful, productive, and well-paid work in New Orleans. As a freelancer who enjoys a positive relationship with many colleagues and interlocutors in my immediate and extended networks, I still have found it difficult to break the glass ceiling as a woman, as a Black person, and as a young professional. There is still a pervasive mindset that resists any change to the present status quo of entrenched hierarchies; it has been my institutional affiliation with Duke University, my northern accent and my academic credentials which have worked most favorably for me. I shudder to think about the limited opportunities available to men and women who do not already have access to such forms of cultural capital. The restaurant and hospitality industries offer the most promising prospects with their constant need for chamber maids, fry cooks, dishwashers, and clerks. The casinos and hotel chains which comprise the majority of the hospitality industry are not friendly to union organizing, or even informal collective bargaining; needless to say, neither are the fast-food franchises and restaurateurs.

I see the nonprofit world as one in which Black folks, and people of color more broadly are attempting to eke out alternatives to the shrinking job market. With the political capital the Black voting blocs had scrupulously worked to build now spent – William Jefferson's, Oliver Thomas', and Ray Nagin's corruption charges notwithstanding – it seems that even into the twenty-first century the most enduring

forms of capital available to Black people in New Orleans are socio-cultural. This becomes apparent when you begin to realize that the proliferation of Black-led NGOs in the past thirty years has been paralleled neither by an explosion of Black-owned businesses, nor an explosion of intraracial commercial activity. By putting up a sort of cultural collateral, Black-led NGOs and social enterprises hope to mobilize the resources necessary to create and “publicize new alternatives” (Melucci 1989: 63) to the present regime of white supremacist, capitalist heteropatriarchy.

Recognizing the financial imperatives of the political-economic moment, women like Mama Carol, Mama Vera, and Gia Hamilton have exemplified the concept of “movement entrepreneurs,” by both mobilizing resources and “channeling discontent into organizational forms” (Edelman 2001: 289). However, innovating traditional business models, these women have also drawn upon their multiple, and intersecting identities as women, as Black people, as New Orleanians, and as “Mamas” to fashion a new culture of social relations, thereby envisioning and providing for “the setting of a way of life, forms of behavior, and needs” (Touraine 1988: 25).

A note on violence

By taking a closer look at the discourses of race and resistance, empowerment and protest, and community and congregation, I have attempted to demonstrate the ways in which myths have come to influence what the contemporary political-economic landscape of “rebuilding” allows. It is important to note that the world-building in which the protagonists of this dissertation are engaged can only take place within the context of the “free market.” Contemporary opportunities for political organizing which eschew

and evade the capitalist system have been foreclosed through the use of government surveillance and “neutralization,” police and vigilante terrorism, urban renewal policies, and structural violence. Entering into the non-profit/for-profit organizational dichotomy has become the only way in which dissident constituencies and their claims to public resources can be made legible to the State. But for every claim made to the State, and for every “social movement entrepreneur,” there are countless more Black New Orleanians who have so thoroughly internalized the aforementioned forms of state-sanctioned violence that they pose a danger to themselves and their wider communities still struggling to rebuild. By the 8th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina, the Times-Picayune is reporting a total of 92 murders for the year. And this number is far surpassed by shootings and disappearances. The victims of such self-inflicted violence are overwhelmingly Black.

In the introduction I discussed the importance of myths as stories which encode social mores and worldviews; I exposed myth-making as an activity which aims to shape social mores and worldviews. Upon reflection, I realize that part of the myth-making about New Orleans attempts to expunge the social fact of its extraordinary historical violence. With so much talk about culture, about jazz and second-lines, it becomes all the more easy to externalize. But I’ve never been one to frequent second-line parades: Too hot out there to be dancing all in the streets. And often the parades themselves are sites of violence as young Black men look to settle the score on rivals, enemies, and/or the loved-ones of rivals and enemies.

This year, on Mother's Day, two such assailants shot up a second-line parade, injuring 19 people. Mayor Mitch Landrieu posted this status update to his public facebook page on Monday, May 13:

On Sunday afternoon--Mother's Day, our community was subjected to another senseless act of violence. In response, we're calling the entire community to participate in a Community Response today at the corner of Frenchmen and N. Villere. It starts at 6pm. Please come out to show solidarity in protecting our culture and delivering a message to stop the shootings.

On the one hand, I am happy that the Mayor has taken an interest in raising the issue of violence to public discussion, on the other hand, I am afraid that rallies which bring people together to "stop the shootings" may, in fact, be short-sighted. Does the Mayor have any idea as to why violence is so pandemic in Black communities throughout New Orleans? We already know the who. As an anthropologist, I am especially interested in the why. I can surmise that some of the reasons why young Black men act out with aggression and violence include the lack of meaningful and creative job opportunities. Not only do service-sector jobs pay appallingly low wages, but also these jobs do not allow for creativity, they do not allow workers to offer meaningful contributions to society, they impart neither a sense of achievement nor belonging. I can also speculate from my time living in New Orleans that there are very few recreational outlets for adolescents; sure this city is fun and games, but if you are not old enough to drink (or simply don't want to), what is one to do?

Cathy Stanton (2005) notes that cities and towns whose main industry has either fled or atrophied often attempt to rescue an aestheticized past in order to attract would-be tourists and city consumers. This is precisely what took place in post-bellum New Orleans, and it has continued, steadily intensifying since the city hosted the last World's Fair in 1984. Public art/history projects tend to put distance between the past and its

contemporary representation through the “reciprocity of disappearance and exhibition” (31). In New Orleans this dynamic plays out in that tourists and consumers are lured to the city because of its vibrant culture (mainly music, food, architecture, and carnival) while the culture-bearers are disappeared; the products of their creative labor, however, are exalted, exhibited and commodified.

John Hannigan (1998) describes the social and class relations corresponding to the revitalized centrality of cultural production for urban economics, making reference to the tension between visibility and disappearance as well. In *Fantasy City*, there are stark divisions between inhabitant and visitor as officials and tourism boosters strive to brand their city as a unique destination hot spot; the role of consumers are downsized to that of passive recipients of culture, and the owners/investors/developers come to stand in for the cultural producer whose historical and material context for production has been disappeared from public view. In the Big Easy, the markers of this historical and material context are anything if disappeared, however: Monuments, museums and other institutions, school and street names serve to preserve the history of white supremacist violence which created the conditions for the accumulation of wealth for white elites.

It’s no wonder, then, that young Black men and women feel so disaffected, so alienated, and so angry. You couple these dynamics with the everyday experiences of police terror and surveillance that many Black residents in New Orleans suffer, and you have a powder keg, ready to explode. You simply cannot expect for people who survive under all sorts of structural violence not to internalize that violence. Unfortunately, so many young Black men have received messages saying that their lives are not valuable.

They see these messages reflected in the physically dilapidated conditions of their neighborhoods; they see these messages reflected in the constant turnover of amateur and untrained teachers in their schools; they see these messages reflected in the rates of school closure in Black communities; they see these messages reflected in the lack of public transportation infrastructure in neighborhoods where so many do not own cars; they see these messages reflected in the abuse and brutality suffered at the hands of those who swore an oath “to protect and serve;” they see these messages reflected in the inaccessibility of health insurance, mental health services, or even nutritious food. These messages are received *before* young Black men and women even have a chance to see how the other half live; a ride on the St. Charles streetcar only drives home the point. Staring out the window at all the mansions and manicured lawns, it is an act of resistance *not* to give in to thinking that you are worthless, if you come from Hollygrove, Central City, New Orleans East, or the Lower 9th Ward.



Figure 20: Times-Picayune headline, September 1, 2013

Mayor Landrieu has spent quite a bit of his political capital investing in the cultural economy, first as Lt. Governor of Louisiana, and now as the Mayor of New

Orleans. Perhaps unwittingly, he has helped to create the very conditions cited above. If Mayor Landrieu – or any of the Black-led organizations which aim to create a safer and healthier environment for Black men, women and children – wants to move beyond ad hoc, and largely symbolic, responses to pandemic violence, he would do well to commission a group comprised of activists, anthropologists, educators, and young folks to investigate the root causes of Black male violence. Give these young men, an opportunity to productively vent their frustrations, and an alternative to the everyday violence of social relations. Let them tell us what the solutions should be. Of course, the research is just a tool, and if he is to take this issue seriously, he must then follow up on the findings and put his money where his mouth is. Then and only then, can we expect the culture of violence among Black youth to change.

The problem of the twenty-first century

Race is still very much a defining factor for how one views the notion and lives the consequences of “progress” in contemporary New Orleans. Fittingly, many of the city’s grassroots community institutions and NGOs organize around the principle of racial justice. Arts and culture organizations, like the mutual aid and pleasure clubs which send their members parading through the streets, use leisure activities to draw attendance and create communities. Single-issue organizations such as JJPL, FFLIC, the New Teachers’ Roundtable, and so many more are clear on the ways in which the education and criminal injustice systems act as matrices of racial oppression, perpetuations of the violence of the race-making project. And while many more of these

grassroots institutions are emerging in the wake of the massive 2005 levy failures, there does not seem to be a corresponding availability of philanthropic funds tied to racial justice initiatives. Nor has there been any real conversation about race and justice in the newly-forming social enterprise landscape. Instead, what we have seen is that in the age of Obama the more successful non-profits and social enterprises find ways to capitalize on Black culture without engaging in the rhetoric of racial justice. This strategy, deployed by principally by Black women, is an old one wherein a certain amount of dissemblance is required to secure a safe-space for Black community-building. Caught between the proverbial rock and hard place, Black-led organizations, in order to gain access to the capital necessary to build total, and sustainable institutions, must exit the matrix of psychological domination only to enter the system of political patronage and disaster capitalism. It is with myth, and magic, intelligence and cunning, strength and grace, dignity and daring that the movement is carried forth.

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Biography

I was born Ronni Brooks Armstead in Boston, MA on October 6, 1983. I attended Oberlin College and graduated in 2005 with a degree in Hispanic Studies, taking minors in African American Studies and Religion. While at Oberlin I was awarded the Bonner Scholarship as well as the Mellon-Mays Undergraduate Fellowship. My Mellon thesis was entitled “No es fácil: Struggles in the lives of Black Cuban women,” and drew greatly from interviews and participant observation conducted in Havana, Cuba during a study abroad semester in 2003. In 2007, I abridged and revised my Mellon thesis, publishing it in the National Women’s Studies Association Journal under the title “Growing the size of the Black woman: Feminist activism in Havana hip hop.” This article has since been revised slightly and re-published in the anthology *Getting in is not enough: Women and the global workplace (A feminist formations reader)*, edited by Colette Morrow and Terri Ann Fredrick (2012). Returning to the source material one final time, I published a much more theoretically astute application of the thesis as “Las Krudas, spatial practice, and the performance of diaspora” in *Meridians* in 2008.

After graduating from Oberlin in 2005, I enrolled at Duke University where I would earn both an MA and a Ph. D from the Department of Cultural Anthropology. While at Duke, I have been awarded the Sarah Duke Fellowship, the Pre-dissertation and Dissertation Research Travel Award, as well as the Julian Price Graduate Fellowship in Humanities and History. In 2009 I moved to New Orleans to conduct field research. In 2010, I changed my name to Fari Nzinga.